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# HELL'S KITCHEN

Benjamin  
Appel



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# **ROUGH—TOUGH—SHOCKING**

**Torn from the heart of the Big City, these stories will leave you both shocked and astonished. Here are the grimy, violence-ridden pavements of Hell's Kitchen—and the people who walk them—told by an author who lived there.**

**You will read about Fallon, who thought that Mary was an easy pushover until he met up with her vengeful father. You will learn about Larry, who wanted money fast and easy, and who wound up in the dirty waters of the Hudson. And you'll live the few tense and fear-filled moments when Detective Corcoran, gun in hand, confronts a young killer on a tenement rooftop.**

**Here is a book that will leave you breathless with excitement as you see, for the first time, the crime, violence and corruption that are spawned from a few square blocks of—Hell's Kitchen.**





# **HELL'S KITCHEN**

**Benjamin Appel**



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*To My Mother and Father*

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## CONTENTS

THE GOOD FAMILY . . . . .	5
THE KID WITH THE SUNDAY PUNCH	18
OH, MOTHER . . . . .	38
THE BIG JINX . . . . .	42
RED MIKE, MABEL AND ME . . . . .	55
PIGEON FLIGHT . . . . .	65
CRAZY KID . . . . .	74
MOVIE OF A BIG SHOT . . . . .	84
FRIDAY WE CRACK THE BANK . . . .	98
GUY WITH THE BUSTED JAW . . . .	112
BROTHERS IN HELL'S KITCHEN . . .	118
ASK ANYBODY . . . . .	126
MURDER OF THE FRANKFURTER MAN	134





## THE GOOD FAMILY

MARY GUESSED it was n.g. the minute she looked through the store window. N.g. means no good; no good means punko twice over. N.g., something inside of her muttered. It was one of her sweetheart's favorites. Were they wise about Jim?

Pa wasn't at his post near the window, repairing shoes, trimming down the leather to the shape of footprints. Even as she moved toward the door, she was scared. The sheet of paper in his hand, he was talking to her kid brother. Joe didn't say boo, his big forearms (twice the size of Jim's, who used his arms for dancing and loving and not much else) hanging with a sad listlessness as if they regretted not working. Joe was only fit to shine a pair of kicks. It is funny to see hardworkers loafing. When they loaf, it's bad. Thinking of her sweetheart, she entered bringing her sin with her like a child born out of wedlock.

"How's tricks?" she said. She was seventeen and seventeen meets danger with a wisecrack and a sick grin.

Pa put the paper back in his pocket. "Get supper, Mary." His tall lank body twitched, the shoemaker's apron knotted about his waist. She watched, posed as if about to dance or run. The two of them were father and



daughter so much even to the thin handsome faces with the mouths cut from marble, that Joe was an outsider to both of them. This happens in all families. Mary was tickled she resembled Pa so much.

"Damn," muttered Joe, moving to the row of shoeshine chairs. He picked up a can of polish. But Pa'll do what's best. He'll do the right thing. He was proud of his father. He didn't look like him but he was him.

"What's eatin' you, Joe?" she said.

"Some language. That's what you go to high school for." He stiffened his short powerful body.

"Let her alone," said Pa.

"You said it. Make that ape shut his trap."

"He's a good boy. Get upstairs, you." His dead smile chilled her, made her think n.g. The dusty store was haunted with the ghosts of words strangled before speaking. She picked up the briefcase and went outside. They lived in a flat above the store. It's hell to pay, she thought, getting a big pot for vegetables. She whispered a little.

Father and son looked at one another with a bitter male anger. "Mary must be made good woman," said the father.

"She's wise," said Joe. "She picks on me. That shows she's wise." He confronted his father with the threatening body of a grown man. But his face was a boy's although the rigid proofs of manhood, the stronger chin, the harsher cheekbones, were already pushing through his youth and would soon possess. He was fourteen. "We gotta do something, Pa."

"Must be made good woman. Our mama is dead. Better so." He had forgotten to turn that dead smile off. (Joe wanted to yell: Pa, cut it out, will you!) He took out the

sheet of paper. It was a letter. It began . . . To you Wop, Ginzo, I mean you. . . .

It could have been written only by a young boy or an old man. It had been written because Mary was two-timing the gang, including Yours Truly, and was liberal to one guy. A guy Jim Fallon. What would the Wop, Ginzo, do about it? Would the Ginzo fix things so Mary'd be crush for the world?

It ended: Here is hoping. And the Army and Navy is hoping. Bet your life. . . .

He tore the letter into bits. He stared through the shop window out on Eighth Avenue, his gaze the sad and speculative one of a man outlawed to a foreign city. Traffic was a steady flash of meaningless activity. People passed and they were meaningless too, trees taught to walk, without heart.

"We gotta do something, Pa."

"We must find Fallon." His English was surprisingly good with the odd Irish intonation of Italian shoe-repair men and Jewish tailors in neighborhoods predominantly Irish-American. He was hating in the store. He wanted to kill. "A girl with no mother is no good."

"Ill fix that damn rat," shouted the boy, his nostrils in wax. He sobbed.

Implacable, the father said slowly, "A woman needs a woman. She must be good woman."

"You'll do the right thing, Pa. You bet."

"She marry Fallon or I kill the bastard."

The boy leaned over the shoe he was shining and the father looked at the broad shoulders of a man. His Joe was a good son. But when the man turned his boy's face, the eyes swollen and wet, he saw a little child with tears on his cheeks. His own eyes were hard, dry with hate.



He resoled several pairs of shoes. . . . The sin had come alive for all of them because of the letter.

After supper Mary knew it was n.g. sure enough. The men didn't go downstairs to work as they usually did. All through the mechanics of eating, she had quivered at her men. They ate. They looked. They were sore as hell. She had thick glowing hair and dark eyes inlaid under fine brows like the father's, not like Joe's, which protruded. Guys could go for her all right. The father told her about the letter.

And even when she wept in their man-silence, censorious, remote, they were not impressed who in a way had also torn their hair. She began one story, ended with another. She spread her clumsy lies like a fish setting its own net, and then enmeshed herself.

"Mary," he said finally. "I ask you, tell me the truth. Who hates you? Nobody. I help you. You are me. We are a good family. This bad city, bad people."

She believed her father.

Of the three, Joe was hurt the most who was most innocent. This, too, she knew with a wisdom, sly and female. Joe had a tough job to keep from bawling. Pa was swell. She wiped her eyes, told her story.

The dregs of time and all the years were settling in the clear glass of this moment. And it was all over with. She had hung out with the guys and girls. Night-times on Eighth Avenue. In doorways of lofts. Joking. Kidding. Nothing wrong in that even if some of the guys got fresh. ("But nothin' wrong, Pa.") Then, about two months ago, she and another girl had gone to a party. ("Nothin' wrong in that, Pa.") They had gone to parties before. But this party was a frame-up. She and her friends were the

only girls. Soon as they came in the fellows grabbed them. They were . . . ("It was awful, Pa.")

"You should've told your father."

She'd been ashamed, afraid. Then, somehow, she had gone around with Jim. She was Jim's girl. She loved him. He loved her when he got to know her real well, after that party. At the party, he'd thought she was just another of them.

What had been a long time in telling was shorter than a breath, and yet they looked back over eternity to another life that had been before the letter, as to a greener Italy. Joe was sick to the guts, not thinking of the attack, although the shadow of the rape was still attacking him so that his insides trembled.

"Don't hurt Jim," she begged. "I love him."

"I no hurt the husband of my daughter."

"For mama, don't hurt him, Pa."

"I no hurt the husband of my daughter."

He went downstairs with his son. His son told him what gang Fallon hung out with and on what corner he could be found. Pa was O.K. even if the spilling of blood was his own thought. That bastard knocking off his sister. But he was fourteen. Pa knew best.

The gang of kids of whom Jim Fallon was one, specialized in attacks on neighborhood girls. It was a system. They worked the dames along and finally fixed them whether they liked it or not. There are gangs who specialize in petty robberies. Other kid gangs play pool and hold beer parties. Others work and are respectable. But the gang that hung out on Eighth in front of the stationer's, a few blocks below Twentieth Street, specialized in attacks. It was just so.

They were lounging against the window, nine fellows



who seemed the multiplication of one, all of them around eighteen, slim, sporty, their faces brash with a spitting contempt of the world, and for women in particular.

"I want Fallon," he said, bewildered.

They wisecracked. "Here's a ginzo sweetie for Jim."

"Lovebird forya, Jim."

"The phoney wants aborrer dough."

He glanced from one face to another, unhuman as reflections in a mirror, at the hard mocking eyes that suddenly seemed to be surrounding one who looked like the rest and, yet, were differentiated. The father stared at his daughter's lover. Fallon wore a doublebreasted suit. He had the features of a handsome bell-hop, a cigarette in his twisting mouth.

"You Fallon?"

"What you want?" he said, not moving a step. "Who're you?"

"My name Lanza. Speak to me private, please."

And now somebody screeched it out like a bird cry: "It's your hon's ole man." They took it up like a flock obeying a leader, their eyes brighter, slick in their plumage.

"Mary's ole man."

"Kid Ginzo himself."

"Ask him for the shotgun, Jim."

"You say it here and now," said Fallon, backing against the window, his pals about him. "Try a thing funny and we'll knock you into tomorrer's garlic."

"Private business, please."

"Private your hat!"

The shrill voices hooted again like bird cries. "Give'm a minnit, Jim."

"A minute's plenty for a knife in the guts."

"Hey, wop, get the hell outa here," Fallon said wittily. "Quit botherin' respectable guys, you ginzo, or I'll call the cops."

He walked away with the disgust of a man come upon crows sitting on a dead cow in a woods. Better to kill such a one.

One of the kids said to Jim, "Pretty tall for a ginzo. Just like Mary. A swell kife like Mary is worth a dagger in your throat. Ain't it? Like the hell."

The next night and yet a third, he walked to the corner and spoke to Fallon. No use. Fallon wouldn't see him alone. On the third night Fallon got sore and cursed like the devil. He looked at the chosen of his daughter and went away. Fallon would not marry her. Mary's disgrace must be wiped out. His duty was plain. He felt better.

On the fourth day he placed a big FOR SALE sign in the store window. He had arranged to live at the home of a cousin who owned a little fruit market further west in the Village. By agreement, another of his blood, a cobbler by trade, was to take his place in the store. His eyes were hard, almost happy. He swore to Mary, in the name of his dead wife, he wouldn't harm Fallon. But he must speak with him. In a good family the father must account to God for his children's lives. It was his duty to speak to Fallon about her. He wanted her to see her lover, to tell him he had gone to Philly to find a new business there, to invite Fallon to their home. He would be at their cousin's. When he heard Fallon was with her he would rush over.

She stared at him, her eyes slumbrous. "Want me to lie, Pa?"

"A father not so good like him, eh? Mother of Christ!"



His eyes, like her own, held anger and the brooding timeless ice of one who has decided.

"He won't come to your house. He ain't crazy."

"You are a woman," he said slowly. "Woman knows how to get man to see her if man loves her. A lover cuts his throat for love, we say in old country." He watched the blood wash her face. "He come to love you so he say to his friends: 'Me, I go Mary in her father's house' . . . I swear by your mama, I no touch him with one finger even." He frowned. "But if you no trust your father, no do as I say, I find him out. I kill him in the street like a dog."

"I trust you, Pa. You want him to marry me, Pa. Ain't it, Pa?"

"What you think. Sure."

She was still a child and loved her father. He took an empty valise and went downstairs to his son. He would be at the cousin's. Fallon would come. And Mary had promised to telephone Joe at the store, from the flat. She would speak of eggs and butter but when Joe heard her voice, Joe must call him who would be waiting. Their faces were tense. They kissed with solemnity as if the father were going so far away that when he would return there'd be no knowing him.

Mary met Fallon several times on the corner. Each time she refused to go with him for she, who had become a woman, knew what her father had meant about a woman's way with a lover. And Fallon, sullen, soreheaded, remembering how often meetings there had been way-stations to hot-times, got steamed up. In the beginning he suspected a trap. That was in the beginning. She wouldn't go with him. Twice he refused to come to her house but after he had seen the FOR SALE sign

and the stranger working in the stead of the father, he almost believed it was on the up-and-up. It wasn't true belief although he wanted to believe and finally thought he did.

"Why at your joint? Why there?"

"If you love me, you'll come. I love you." She hung her head. "You won't get hurt."

"Who the hell's afraid?"

"I want you to come cause I say so. I got no reason. I just want you to come just because I say so."

"O.K.," he said at last, because he wanted her, because he figured she wouldn't get him in dutch who was nuts about him, because he was tough and had a contempt for wops, because he wanted her.

When Joe's voice said over the phone, "Come quick, Pa. He's upstairs with her," he thought his son's breath was hot on his face. He taxied to the store. Joe was waiting.

"Come, Joe." To his kin he said, "Stay here, Antonio." He carried a valise, for he would not make his daughter a liar to her lover. In the valise was a knife.

He unlocked the door, entered. "I come from Philly and this is what you show me, Mary."

Fallon got up, wiping rouge from his lips, cocky, nervous, watchful. He glared at Joe, relocking the door. Hell, it was n.g. N.g. and punko twice over. "Can't a feller call? She ain't queen o' the wops."

"You no call names." He dropped the valise. "I speak to you about Mary."

"Gwan."

"Go downstairs, Mary. This men talk. No worry. I say long ago I no hurt him." Again Joe unlocked and locked the door.



"You'll wear the key out," said Fallon.

He was more at ease after the old man's promise, staring at the gray-haired ginzo whose dark eyes hardly glanced at him. The little ginzo was shaking. Hell. Two ginzos. His sweetie's menfolk seemed so dumb, he lit a butt. He had courage. "I been keepin' company with her," said Fallon.

"You live like man and wife."

"What the hell you want?" cried Fallon, fidgeting at the silence coming at him in two long pressing beams from the eyes of the old man.

"I am a good family. She must be good woman, my Mary." He was in no hurry with the trapped lover.

It was good hurting him with words.

"Well, get it off your chest. I gotta go."

"I get letter about her and you, Fallon. No lie to me. You marry her, seducer?" He peered at the Irishman's manicured nails that were the talons of an evil bird's, at the bright hawk eyes.

"Sure. Make a loud enough squawk and why not? She's a swell kid." He, in turn, scrutinized the father to see whether the lie had sunk into him.

The old man knew it was a lie. Fallon wouldn't marry Mary. He attempted to penetrate the polished gaze. Long as Fallon lived it was no good. He gripped the handle of the valise. He flashed it open, gave the knife to his son. "Joe. He kill Mary. You kill him. I no hurt you, Fallon."

In that calamitous second, Fallon dropping his cigarette and breathing the smoke out in pale wreaths as if expelling the ghost within him, the father suddenly knew that all the time, all the time, he must kill. No other way. He had known it all along. A thief is treated in a certain way. A rapist and seducer in a certain way.

"Christ!" cried Fallon.

The boy had seized the knife, hypnotized to his father's will. His impulse was death, cold in anger, remorseless as lightning, as wind, rushing forward. Fallon seized the back of a chair. And the father, swifter, grabbed the legs of the chair, holding it tight. For a second, Fallon and the old man stared and then Fallon, choking back his fear, let go, as if the chair were of no use, as if it had frozen in mid-air. He backed up against the wall, sparring out at the strong short body hurtling at him with the knife. He looked like a man unjustly done to death, his eyes staring for a help that was not there. The knife slashed through his outstretched coat sleeve. He groaned as if already murdered. Thus groaning, even before the knife slashed through his guard into his side, he faltered and for a while seemed to listen to his voice, hoarse, frightened, as if his voice had paused in space like the chair, piling up all its sound, something compact to see as a chair, and now silent, forgetting to shout, he fell, the knife in his heart.

The father pulled his son away as one yanks a vicious terror from a rat already dead.

"Go downstairs," he said. "Go screaming. Call the police. Shout murder. Go screaming of a fight. Go say I fight. Your father fights. Scream your father is fighting a man. I promise Mary no hurt him. My guilt. You my arm. Go screaming, 'A man is killing your father.' "

Already there was the bumbling of excited people somewhere, or was it imagination?—the hearing of what would be a minute later? And still the boy stood stunned. "Joe, my Joe, I take the guilt. Self-defense, hah. His friends say I try see him. They talk. I will be a free man.



No die. I cut myself so the cops think he stab me, that I fight for life."

The boy unlocked the door, ran out screaming, Murder. . .

The father took the knife and slashed his cheek. He gripped the handle tighter. He stabbed his forearm. He bled in both places and sat down. America. One could not kill for honor. Self-defense. . . .

When the cop came in like a blue spearpoint on the shaft of the pushing crowd he saw the gray shoemaker sitting, weary of death. The knife was on the floor. It pointed to the corpse as if indicating that there, strangely enough, honor lay as well as death.

Mary didn't faint. She said nothing.

Joe was hypnotized, the voice shouting was not his voice. "They fought. He grabbed the knife to kill Pa. He stabbed him."

The shoemaker held out his wrists.

The cop said, "I ain't handcuffing you, Lanza."

"They fight about my sister," hollered Joe.

"So that's it," said the cop. "A phone here? Hey, one of you. Call a doctor. Want him to bleed to death? He twisted three or four neckties, fastened the tourniquet above the bleeding forearm. He was busy.

"Mother of Christ!" whispered the father. "I no want to kill but he try to kill me."

Mary was silent, and nothing could be told of whether she was good again. He hoped honor would come to her as it had come to him and Joe. The cop fussed over him. He suddenly laughed. He was not honorable and neither was Mary. If she were a good woman she would never have lured Fallon to the flat. If he were a good man he would never have slain with his son's arm. And how he

had protected himself. Mother of Christ, how carefully! Every detail planned out as if he were a murderer. They were father and daughter.

It hardly seemed possible to Joe that he had fixed Fallon. He couldn't believe it. It wasn't him. No. He thought, they'd let Pa off. It was self-defense.

Another cop came in. A doctor got up from the corpse. The father thought he and Mary were bad. Only Joe was good, a Lanza.

Mary had begun to cry. The father breathed deeply as if her tears were Christ's washing away her sins, his sins. His eyes were dreamy. God was good. His daughter. She was his flesh. Somehow, Joe was out of it.

"Oh, Pa, Pa," she wailed.



## *THE KID WITH THE SUNDAY PUNCH*

THE BIG BLOND KID in the green sweater ran up the subway stairs, still clenching and unclenching the fingers of his right hand. His name was Stan Naglak, and to him, the subway was a sort of gymnasium on wheels. Twice a day, going to work and coming home, Stan would grip the support above his head with his right hand, lean back, sway, twist, his weight on the muscles of his right arm and hand. He exercised his left, too, Stan did, but it was the right that carried the Sunday punch. Stan had plans for the Sunday punch. In the winter when he would be seventeen, he intended to go in for boxing serious. The Golden Gloves. If he got somewhere, he'd turn pro. He wasn't rushing though. He'd heard of too many good kids diving into the boxing racket before they were ready and all washed-out before they were twenty.

He hurried down his block, the breeze from the river beyond the West Side Highway, blowing in his taffy yellow hair. He breathed deep. Oh, to ship out, he movie day-dreamed: to go to Portugal, to India, to all those places . . . Able seaman Stan Naglak, fazed by nobody . . . Two-fisted Savage Stan battling it out with the toughest sailors on board. He lifted his right fist and there

went rat number one on a free trip to the clouds. Another right, and there went rat number two. With the lightning speed of a boy walking home in the springtime, the sailors he had just slugged changed into a row of boxers, the leading welterweight in the country . . .

"How's your mother, Stanley?"

The big blond kid tumbled out of a dream world of prize-rings, to see an old woman with a face wrinkled like the brown paper bag of groceries she was carrying. Coffin bait, Stan thought: but even this old cow of a Mrs. Murphy could shop and do things, not like his mother. "Okay," he muttered, hurrying by.

He had reached the middle of the block before he noticed the convertible parked near the house where he lived. In that street of red brick walls and iron stoops painted with cheap blacks and greens, the convertible gleamed bright and gray and perfect. At the wheel sat two grimy little kids. "How ya like the new boat, Stan?" they greeted him. "Wanta ride around?"

His eyes had slanted fearfully to the license plate. But the convertible didn't belong to a doctor. Whose was it? So near his house? Just a fluke or *them* . . . He ran for the stoop and behind him, the kids wondered aloud, "Looka Stan go!"—"Like when he licked Angie for foolin' with his sister."—"Wow, you shoulda seed that fight, Stan ain't afraid nobody."—"I wuz there! That Angie had twunny pounds on Stan." So they gossiped—the folklore of kids in a tenement neighborhood.

Up the four flights of stairs, Stan sprinted. Winded, he fumbled for his key. The gray convertible! A fluke, he prayed, unlocking his door and entering the kitchen. His sister Natalie was setting the oilcloth-covered kitchen table; his brother Petey reading a comic, a dark brown-



eyed kid like the father who was dead. "Where's mom?" Stan asked his sister. "She got comp'ny?"

"How do you know?" Natalie said. She was only fourteen but as she looked at him with huge blue eyes, it was as if she were his mother. "How do you know somebody's here, Stan?"

"I'm a dick, that's how! Answer what I ast you! How long they here?"

"A half hour about. Stan, there somethin' wrong?"

He shook his head, a sick smile on his lips. He crossed the kitchen, the smell of the cabbage soup simmering on the gas range, lifting into his nostrils. He walked into the bedroom where he and Petey slept. Got to take it easy, he warned himself: got to look like it ain't me. Deliberately, he slowed his stride into the next room of the railroad flat, the bedroom of his mother and Natalie. He stopped at the knob of the door into the front room. The breath poured out of him, he gasped. The door knob was made of colorless glass, but now the light from the window on the shaft seemed to suffuse it with a menacing golden light, like the golden pupil in an inhuman eye. Take it easy, Stan told himself: they got no proof, they got no proof.

He reached for the knob and with the cautious wary movement of a fighter at the bell, he eased into the front room. "Lo, Mom," he said, closing the door gently, not looking at the visitor.

"We been waiting, Stan," his mother smiled but the smile didn't look right on her twisted lips. She was in her fifties but only her broad cheekbones had withstood the hammering of the disease destroying her; her forehead was wrinkled like a grandmother's, her bloodshot eyes scooped out in a face, stripped of all flesh. "This is

Mista Riley, Stan," she explained timidly. "He won't say why he come."

The man called Riley nodded, a small man in an expensive blue flannel suit, with a face smooth as silk as if he had never said no to any barber. In this room with its heavy little-used furniture and holy pictures on the walls, Riley was as out of place as his convertible below in the tenement street. "Yer ole lady and me been havin' a chat," he confided. His voice was low, assured.

The big blond kid had never seen the man, but this Riley looked what he was, one of the higher-ups. A great big car, and fancy clothes, and that higher-up voice like he was it and everybody else was not, Stan was thinking.

"Yer old lady's been tellin' me about yer job," Riley was saying. "A natural like you's wastin' yer time as a shippin' clerk. Should be inna ring, Stan. Inna ring."

Stan couldn't guess whether Riley was serious or kidding him. The voice like the face was too smoothed down. Stan's blue chips of eyes showed no emotion, as if they were made of bone like his long hard chin. He waited for Riley to talk some more with the patience of an animal or a slum kid. Riley stared at him and as if recognizing the meaning of that silence, he said harshly, "Wastin' yer time and my time, ain't we? Les see now. What you done's trouble all around, for you and me both."

Mrs. Naglak clasped her hands, her knuckles whitening as if holding onto a mad dog about to spring at her son. "Trouble!" she cried.

"Mom, don't worry," he said to her. "I donno why he's even here!"

Riley's greenish eyes took in the sick woman and her big son. The old woman, he figured, was running a rat race with cancer. As for the Polack kid, the kid hadn't



gone screwy because of some girl. It was the old woman and the family on the kid's back. "Maybe I'd done the same if I was in yer shoes," Riley said softly, "only I'm not in yer shoes, Stan. You gotta pay up, bud."

"You police?" the mother shrilled. "You police, Mista Riley? Stan? What is?"

"Ask Stan who I am," Riley replied.

She lurched up out of her chair, approached her son, but he held dumbly onto his silence. Riley shrugged, "I'll tell you who I am, Missus Naglak. I'm in business like Stan can tell you only he won't. Business, see. The numbers business. Last week one of my collectors, feller by name of Harry, was mugged. Ain't that right, Stan? Harry was mugged. Right? That's the story I hear on the street. I hear that the one who mugged Harry was a feller by name of—"

"You hear a lotta baloney on the street!" Stan shouted. "You been snoopin' around the guys and some rat's fed you a line of baloney!"

"You mugged Harry, Stan!"

"Got suspicions, gwan to the cops!"

"My God!" Mrs. Naglak whispered and sagged into a chair.

"Mom," Stan begged, jerking his thumb at Riley. "What's suspicions, Mom. Some of them guys hate me. Let'm go to the cops!"

"Stan, we don't take the cryin' towel to them," Riley said calmly, sitting there, poised and wise of mouth, like a judge who had moved his court into this old-fashioned parlor. "We handle our own troubles, Stan, like you know. Stan, I see yer ole lady and yer family and I'm gonna give you a chance to square things—"

"Square what things? I didn't mug Harry!"

Riley lifted one manicured hand. "I see yer set-up and I haven't got a stone for a heart—"

"Who cares what you got!" Stan raged, his eyes on his mother's face.

"I'll let you off easy," Riley continued as if he hadn't heard him, like a judge impervious to the pleas of the condemned. "I'll give you a week. You took about three ten from Harry. We'll call it three hundred even. I'll cut the hundred for Harry personal to fifty for muggin' him. Three fifty you owe me."

Stan was unable to speak. He heard his mother weeping and lifted a hand towards her. She shook her head. And the tongue was back in Stan's mouth. "Get outa here before I chuck you out! Mom, don't believe'm! Don't believe'm!"

"Never get inta fight you can't win," Riley advised him. "Three fifty you owe me. I want you to come to the Clover Grill at ten tonight, over on Twenny-Second and Eight'. That's yer last chance to square things. Ten tonight."

..

"Get outa herel!" Stan answered.

His mother rose from her chair, heavy as death, the tears streaming down her fleshless cheeks. Like a blind thing she walked towards Riley. Dropping to her knees, she seized his hands as if he were a priest. "Mista Riley," she begged, "for sake God."

"Put yerself in my place," Riley said uneasily, trying to free his hands. "Let a guy get away with a muggin' and everybody gets the idear. You can't do it in the business."

"Mista Riley, for sake God."

He pursed his lips as if about to speak. Then disengaging his hands, he shrugged and walked to the door.



He turned as if to say something. His eyes had softened but his lips stayed shut, and in silence, he left. It was as if he had never been there. Only the judgment was real.

Natalie and Petey rushed inside, asking questions. They gaped at their mother on her knees. "Start supper," she said to them. "Natalie! Petey!" The children backed out of the front room like two cats. Stan helped his mother get to her feet. She looked at him. He flushed, walked to the window. He heard her plodding over to him as if coming from a great distance. She patted his powerful forearm in the green sweater sleeve, "Stan, you done it!"

"Mom," he begged.

"You done it. Don't lie, Stan. Tink I know you better'n your father even. He, man. You, boy. Boy more easy know."

He stared into her face and for a second forgot all about Riley. All he could think of was that soon she'd die. Oh, God, why'd it have to be her, his own mother, why'd it have to be a disease nobody could cure. Multiple sclerosis, the doctors called it. Creeping death, was what he called it. Year by year, almost month by month, her muscles and nerves could do less and less.

He heard her saying, "Last week, all that money! You say you borrow the bank. What is worst, you break your promise never to be stealer crook."

"It wasn't stealin', Mom!" he protested. "You should see the car Riley's got, worth four thousand! He collects from the suckers, how often do they win! I only took the money from a racket!"

"All our life, your father, me, want you good, honest," she moaned.

"I am honest, Mom. Don't I work for a livin'? But we

need mor'n I make," he pleaded. "Mom, don't cry. Don't cry!"

She beat weakly at her breasts. "For me you done it," she sobbed. "My lil Stan, for me he stop the school, for me the father, Natalie an Petey, for me, for me." She covered her face with her hands.

He stroked his mother's forehead as if she were now the child. She pushed his hand away, peered out of the window and when she spoke it was as if she had long considered her words. "I know what best is. Night, you sleep, Petey and Natalie sleep, and I tink and tink. You, I worry the most, Stan. You got two arms, strong, but not enough, Stan. Ten arms no enough. Nobody can fight whole world with his arms. Stan, you strong. You tink you fight whole world with your arms. No. Stan, what'll be when I go with your father away—"

"Mom, stop!"

"Why we fool ourself?" she whispered gently. "We fool the children, that's enough. Stan, there's in you, always to fight everybody. When you lil boy, you fight other boy when the bums give you money. First job, you make eighteen a week, you steal shoes for Natalie. Now too much expense, you steal Riley. I'm afraid for you, afraid when I be gone, you buy a gun."

"What gave you that idea, Mom?"

"I see other boys in block. They want to be strong, stronger'n the whole world. They like you, Stan." She seized his arms with her thin hands. "Stan, strong not enough! Strong, not enough! Promise no more stealing, Stan. Promise me for God, for His Son Jesus! Promise!"

His eyes widened, he whispered. "Aw right. For God, for His Son Jesus."

"Promise you do what Riley want."



"That I can't!" He felt her fingers suddenly tightening on his arms as if she were healthy again as in the days when his father'd been alive, so long ago.

"Stan, when you steal shoes, you bring back shoes."

"That was shoes, Mom. This is big dough! Three hundred and fifty bucks! All we got after the bills about eighty."

"Bring eighty, Mista Riley. We save," she said with the religious faith of the poor in savings. "My lil Stanley not a stealer. For me he done it!" she seemed to be expiating her guilt to someone not in the room; her wet eyes lifted towards the ceiling. "For me he done it."

She kissed him on the forehead. "My lil Stanley," she murmured. "Look."

Before them, the roofs of the neighborhood stretched to the north with here and there a warehouse or a loft or an apartment towering above the tenements and highest in the spring sky, the wheeling flocks of pigeons.

"All our life we live in the worry," she continued in that strangely serene voice. "Stan, strong not enough. Stan, go back to school. Go night school like tailor boy on corner. You good school. Go back. Strong not enough. You want to fight whole world? Fight with head and good heart you got, my baby."

He listened to her, his eyes on the pigeons in the sky. They flew as if they didn't ever have to return to their coops—to any coops.

Right after supper, Stan left the house. He couldn't stay another second with his mother always looking at him and Natalie and even Petey asking questions. Downstairs, in the vestibule, he stared hard at his wrist watch, his heart pounding and the sweat coming to his fore-

head. It was 8:17. Less than two hours to go. Here's the eighty bucks, Riley, he rehearsed: here's the eighty . . .

He had fished the money out of the dresser drawer where he'd banked it. A measly eighty bucks, he thought as he walked up the dark sidewalk, passing the people smoking on the stoops. He didn't see the people, they didn't belong. The only things that belonged was two hundred and seventy dollars which he didn't have but had to get. For, eighty from three hundred and fifty left two hundred and seventy. Two seventy! Christ, where'd it come from? From the \$38.75 a week on the job? Christ, even if Riley gave'm a month instead of a week to dig up two seventy, where'd it come from? Maybe Natalie could get a part-time job as a maid, maybe Petey could shine shoes, maybe his Mom could get along without her medicines? Maybe? Like hell maybe! One week wasn't enough unless the guys down the shop'd loan him the two seventy. Fat chance. They all had their own grief down the shop. *The payroll. Heist the payroll.* The thought whizzed through him, all the details falling into place like pieces in a puzzle put together many times. Elley, the bookkeeper, brought the payroll from the bank every Friday morning—Elley put the payroll inside her desk and locked the desk drawer—Elley kept the key in her bag and the bag could be lifted easy. *Easy . . .*

Stan shook his head violently as if trying to shatter the heist, as if it were blueprinted on a pane of glass. He gaped at the shapes of the people on the stoops. Suckers, he thought: suckers playing the sucker numbers while Riley rode around de luxe, and he, Stan, the wise guy, the tough guy, the guy with the Sunday



punch, was as big a sucker as any of them. You were a sucker if you got caught. And Riley'd caught him.

*How?* His eyes half closed as if to concentrate, and across his brain, the mugging traced itself. Harry coming downstairs after collecting from his steady customers, the suckers who bet two or three times a week or even every day. The hallway dark. Hadn't he picked that particular house because the hall lights weren't much good, and for extra measure tied a hank around his face? He'd slipped an armlock around Harry's throat, his right smashing, his good old Sunday punch. Harry couldn't have spotted him and no one'd come in while he was mugging the collector. Then, how come Riley was wise?

Stan wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeved arm. Here, he'd been giving himself the shivers for nothing at all. Then, how come, Riley was wise? Had somebody in the street, somebody in the gang, seen him tailing Harry? Was that it? Riley wouldn't pin the ticket on him just on the say-so of a guy with a grudge, say like Angie. No. Somebody in the gang'd seen him tailing Harry.

*And suppose Riley was only bluffing.*

He choked at the thought, feeling himself cornered, like a little kid in the corner of a black cellar with a big hand reaching for him. "Naw," he muttered to himself, "gotta get over that beat feeling." He better go talk to the gang in his street, for if one of them'd seen him tailing Harry, all of them'd know. Had to find out for sure, for maybe Riley was bluffing. Had to find out, had to use his head like his mother said. Strong was not enough . . . had to fight with his head . . .

He hurried towards Eighth Avenue, near the corner

where the gang hung out in front of the stationery store window, killing time as they did every night. Inside the store was the phone they used for dates, the marble counter where they drank cokes. He greeted the nine or ten boys loitering. Their faces were laughing shadows. "The ole Stan."—"You gonna work night shift?" He became aware of his old green sweater, and the sports shirts and slacks of the gang. He felt their interest ringing him in, and again sensed the presence of that great big creeping hand.

"Gotta fix something in the house," he explained.

"Who says Stan has to worry about duds?" they hooted. "Yeah, he wants a new hat all he has to do is bust the winder!"—"The kid with that Sunday punch!"

Stan forced himself to smile at their faces, lit up but not lit up enough. "That Sunday punch's gonna buy me all the new hats I want and then some," he said.

"Yeah, the old muckle."—"Stan, the old muckle man."—"Knock 'em out Stan."

And then the great big hand snatched at him in the voice of one of the gang, "Riley givin' you a job collectin'?"

"What?" he cried weakly. "What's that guff? What's that line?"

"Riley givin' you a job collectin'?" they pressed him. "That Stan's a collector what I mean!"

"Aw, gwan kid somebody else," Stan said.

"Who's kiddin' who?" they retorted. "He's startin' in numbers from the ground up." "You mean a six foot hole inna ground you mean."

"Kid somebody else!" Stan shouted, walking off, but still their voices pursued him.

"I wouldn't be in your shoes, Strong-arm!"—"Why'nt



you better mug a cop?" "Or a FBI?" And even when their voices were gone, he still heard them and felt that great big hand at his throat and knew that in one way or another, it had always been reaching for his throat.

He hurried around the corner, blinking at the chain stores, the butchers, the Greek groceries, a well of shining glass. Jesus, he thought. Riley wasn't bluffing. Somebody'd seen him tailing Harry, somebody'd ratted. Maybe Angie whom he'd lumped for being fresh to Natalie. He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets, took them out, wiped the sweating palms on his trousers, his heart thudding fast as if ahead in the night, still unseen, but coming at him a mile a minute, was the great big hand he couldn't beat, the fight he couldn't win.

The night was warm, almost balmy, but the big blond kid was shaking as if he had stepped out into the middle of the winter. Okay, he thought frantically: okay, somebody's spotted me, somebody's ratted me. Okay. It's still my word against somebody's. Riley could still be bluffing. Bluff against bluff. *Yeh, that was his line.* Bluff. Use the old head. *Bluff.*

At ten sharp, he walked into the Clover Grill. A line of men at the bar were hoisting their beers, smoking. Stan pushed into an empty place at the shining bar and when the barkeep asked him what he wanted, he said, "Nothin'. Riley. I come to see Riley." The barkeep jerked his thumb at a door in the rear. Stan nodded. He started straight ahead at a jukebox lit up like a cheap rainbow. He heard the jukebox hammering out rainbow words of love. He passed by men arguing and men with their arms around each other's shoulders like loving brothers. In the rear were a row of doors. Stan glanced back at the guzzlers, at the smoke, at the entrance out to Eighth

Avenue. A million miles away, it seemed, as if he'd dug down into a deep tunnel. Jesus, he prayed: give me a break. Hurriedly he made the sign of the cross as he did before diving into the water. Then he knocked on the door, the one without any legend. "Come in," said a voice.

At the single table, Riley, who had been adding figures in a notebook, put his pencil down. Near Riley sat a big man in a double-breasted suit who had been reading the sports pages. "Stan, shut the door," Riley ordered. As he obeyed, the big man grunted.

"A Polack! Nothin' like a shellackin' for a Polack." The big man looked what he was—Riley's muscle. He might even have done some fighting in his time although his dark face showed no crumpled ear or busted nose. "A Polack. A lousy Polack!"

"Sit down, mugger," Riley said to the kid in the green sweater.

"I got nothin' to do with that muggin'—"

Riley smiled, "No?"

"You gotta believe me, Riley."

"Mistuh Riley," the muscle said. "Mistuh Riley, yuh lousy Polack!"

"Stan," said Riley. "Know why I can't believe you? Yer here. That's why I can't believe you. If you had nothin' to do with it, you wouldn't be here. See. I wasn't a hundred percent sure at yer house. Now I'm sure 'cause an innocent guy would've told me off onct and that'd be the end of it."

The great big hand reached in and grabbed the room, cracking the walls and him with it. "You gotta believe me," he muttered, lifting each word as if out of a pit deep inside his soul. "I'm here because I go down after



supper and the guys on the block kid me I'm the mugger. Who started 'em up I dunno. That's why I'm here. That kind of talk's no good so I'm here."

"Why should they have it in for you?" Riley smiled.

"I'm gonna be somebody, a fighter, a pro. I gotta good right. I'm gonna be somebody and they're just a bunch of crumbs."

Riley, still smiling, picked up his pencil. "I wasn't a hundred percent sure but now I am 'cause you're here. Shut up, Stan! My turn. You were seen with a wad of dough payin' off bills. I get the tip, see. I get the tip you're handy with yer fists. I go to yer place, see the set-up. It fits but I ain't sure yet, not a hundred percent sure. Now I'm sure and I don't wanna listen to no more crap. What I want to know is what about the dough. That's all I wanna know, what about the dough?"

Who'd seen him, Stan wondered. Where? The drug-store? The butcher? And what was the diff? Jesus Christ, he shouldn't have listened to his mom, shouldn't have come here, and he felt he could've been nowhere else on earth but in this room with the buff walls, with Riley smiling and the muscle in the double-breasted suit cursing him.

"That face of yours is a dead give-away," he heard Riley saying. "You should see it, mugger."

Stan's eyes faded like an old man's. He dug out his wallet. "Eighty's all I got left."

Riley counted the bills. "You gotta week for the balance. Two hundred and seventy bucks, mugger."

"Gimme more time, Riley. I make thirty-eight seventy-fi' onna job."

The muscle said, "Maybe you want Harry's job collectin'?"

"Maybe I can pay it off workin' for you, Riley?" he pleaded. "I'll do anything you say, Riley."

Riley sighed. "A pip," he remarked to the big man. "The crap don't work, the mugger tries somethin' else."

"What you get playin' Santa to a Polack louse. Gives'm a week. I'd give'm just tonight. Let'm mug somebody else, let'm roll a drunk. A whole week!"

"I was soft," Riley agreed. "It was his ole lady tellin' me what a gilded saint he is. I sit there waitin' for the mugger and she tells me how good he is to her and the kids."

"So what!" the big man said, disgusted. "We in business or what we in?"

"You don't cross somebody goin' to die of cancer," Riley said superstitiously. "My old lady, she died of cancer. Cross somebody like that, it's bad luck."

"Ah," said the big man as if he at last understood.

"Mugger," Riley said bitterly. "I lost enough time count of you. Beat it! You gotta week. Here. Same place. Scram."

The two faces at the table, the smooth barbered one, and the heavy dark one, blurred. "For Christ sake, Riley, lemme work it off, will you?"

"Don't you ever let go?" Riley demanded. "How can you work for me when I couldn't trust you?"

"Riley, you saw my mom, you saw her. It's worse'n cancer. It's multipull sclerosis. For your mother's sake, gimme a chance, Mister Riley!"

It was the first time he had said Mister. Whether because of this or because he had been compelled to remember his own mother, Riley felt an impulse to ease up on the kid. Perhaps if his muscle hadn't been there, a hundred and ninety pounds, with a face like a brick



wall, a witness to all the gab, he might have agreed to a pay-off in installments. "I gave you all the chance—"

"Lemme work it off, Mister Riley. I'm strong—"

"Too damn strong," the muscle said. "Lousy Polack—"

Riley shrugged, "Why don't you take it into a ring instead of muggin' around?"

The muscle stared at his boss, and Riley, as if realizing he was talking like a preacher, shook his head. He wasn't a preacher, he was in the business. He glanced almost apologetically at the muscle, as if that second the muscle was more important than he was. There sat the muscle, a living trademark of the business.

"I can turn pro," Stan offered beseechingly. "Ill pay you back—"

"A pip!" Riley shouted. "God damm, I give you a break 'count of yer ole lady and you keep yappin' one thing and another!" He was glad for the opportunity to shout. "What the hell you think we are? Fight promoters? You gotta week! Beat it, mugger!"

A week, a week, Stan thought, blinking at the electric bulb in the room which flamed in his eyes. His chest heaved inside his sweater, a curse split from his lips. His eyes rolled as if the great big hand had fastened on his throat at last. He lunged at Riley. The muscle sprang up, grabbing Stan's hurtling arm, clutching it like a rope. Stan pivoted, swung his left into the dark face. The muscle grunted, let go, reaching for his gun. Riley yelled, "You damn fool! Slough'm! Slough'm!" Somebody began to knock at the door. The muscle charged, his fists moving so fast they seemed like shadows, the kid retreating. Riley opened the door a crack. It was the barkeep with a blackjack in his fist. "Nothin's wrong,"

Riley hissed, grabbing the blackjack, slamming the door, "A drunk guy, thas all." Inside the room the muscle was crowding Stan who had backstepped clear around the table, his eyes shifting from Riley with the blackjack to the heavy dark chin sunken into the thick shoulder. The muscle missed an uppercut, he feinted, plunged his left into Stan's belly.

Stan bit down the pain. Riley raced at him and in his eagerness, the blackjack flew out of Riley's fingers, cluttered to the floor. The muscle sent another uppercut and Stan glided in on him, throwing his fists, his whole body seeming to be tied to his fists and he caught the dark jaw with his right. The muscle grunted but his heels were nailed to the floor, and his eyes that had been expressionless slits of light, glazed. Stan thought wildly, You're as good as any of them! And in that instant, Riley threw his arms around the kid's neck like a mugger, yelling, "Slough'm! Slough'm, Louey!" The muscle batted his thick fist against his own forehead, recovering. His arms whirled and putting all his heft into a belly punch, he let go, a second, a third into the gut. Riley released his hold of the writhing kid. The muscle cracked an uppercut into the kid's white agonized face.

He dropped to the floor, unconscious. The muscle lifted his foot to kick. "Stop!" Riley ordered.

Like a dog called off, the muscle obeyed. He rubbed at his jaw. "Polack carries a punch for a kid! Lousy crazy Polack—"

"If I wasn't here," Riley said, wiping his face with a silk handkerchief, "Where would you be?"

"Am I finished?" the muscle asked, fumbling with the loose threads on his suit where the buttons had snapped off.



"You oughta be finished. But I guess I'm soft." Wiping his sweat, Riley began to think of the business. Harry's mugging had to be squared. Harry's territory had to see muggers didn't get away with murder. Who could tell what this kid'd do next? He was one in a thousand, a pip. The dough wasn't the big thing any more, Riley considered. The dough could be charged off to profit and loss. What was important was to get things back to normal, for Harry's territory to see with their own eyes that it was better to crack banks than to mug collectors. He suddenly remembered the talk about the kid's Sunday punch. "Louey," he said. "Bust the mugger's arm. The right one."

The muscle seized the kid's slack wrist. He pulled the green sleeved arm taut. He lifted the blackjack high above his head, smashed it down.

Riley quivered, turning away at the thud of contact.

Stan's eyelids opened at the shock—like a hot knife in his arm. Hot knife, teeth. Dazed, he remembered a dog who'd bitten him long ago. The dog was in his arm with the hot knife. Jesus! What'd happened? Where was he? With the hot knife, with the dog, with the two men.

"Stan," he heard Riley saying as if the man wasn't really in the room but was far away. "We're square now. You don't owe me nothin' and I don't owe you nothin'. You go to the cops and you won't get nowhere. Self-defense, see. You come here with the blackjack. We fought you off, self-defense. We got the witnesses and you got nothin'. Louey, get'm to his feet. We'll take the bastard to a dcotor."

"Keep off!" Stan cried at the muscle. "Keep off!" He bared his teeth like a beast. He lifted his body into a sitting position, the sweat gushing from his white face.

His broken right arm hung at his side as if there wasn't a bone in it. He rested a few seconds and then placed his left hand down flat on the floor, swung over to his left knee, staggering upright.

"We'll take you to a doctor," Riley repeated.

"Don't need no favors!" Stan looked at Riley and then at the muscle. He felt as if he'd always seen them, always there was the brain guy, always the muscle, and always the sucker.

"I told you never to get into a fight you can't win," Riley was saying.

Win? Stan thought in a frenzy: how could the sucker ever win? "I'll win you!" he cried with a bitter and terrible defiance. He circled his right wrist with the fingers of his left hand. It felt as if he had a band of fire under his fingertips. Still, he willed his throbbing useless right hand to fist itself, while with his left he lifted his broken Sunday punch at all the enemies. "I'll win you!" he screamed, the tears pouring out of his eyes.



## OH, MOTHER . . .

AMONG OTHERS, Detective Corcoran was looking for young Johnny Gimloe and when, across the night-time avenue with its scattered drunks, he saw the killer's face he breathed deep with shock. His eyes dimmed as his wife's face and his son's face came between him and young Gimloe. But of all these faces, the killer's was clearest. Young Johnny Gimloe . . . named like any plain person but a force, wicked, unhuman, never brought out of a woman, motherless. Young Johnny Gimloe . . . wanted for the holdup and murder of a grocer and the policeman who had attempted to arrest him.

I couldn't let him go as if I never saw him, I've a son, he thought. He isn't human. He's no mother's son. Let him go. Let him go.

He made the sign of the cross and followed. The traffic beacon gleamed red. Stop. Stop. Let him go. No ordinary man would have known he was being stalked but Gimloe knew without turning, and swerved inside a doorway. Let him go. His mind flashed like the traffic beacon. Stop.

The avenue was empty but almost Corcoran could feel the animal eyes of the killer. Pistol in hand he called: "Johnny Gimloe. Come on out."

An El roared overhead in a yellow blaze of light, the cars crowded with city faces.

Corcoran edged closer to the black den of the doorway, his police whistle in his left hand. No sound. Far away the iron wheels screeched against the tracks. No sound. Then sound. Sharp. Menacing. Summoning. Close at hand.

The crack of Gimloe's pistol seemed louder than the El had been. The bullet whistled by Corcoran's face as he lunged after the killer, squeezing the trigger at a target almost out of sight. Down the end of the hallway, young Gimloe. Again he shot and missed. The yard door opened, slammed. Corcoran added up the used bullets. Two of mine. One of his. Two of mine. He's no mother's son. I can't get him. I must get him. Must. Let him go.

Running, he stopped at the yard door. He swallowed a mouthful of air, his hot fingers still clutching the door-knob. Must get him. He pulled the door open, staring at a row of sheds, and beyond the sheds the fire-escapes of a factory, and Christ!—there, waiting, poised, was young Gimloe. Corcoran dropped on his stomach. The steel bullet whined over his head.

Young Gimloe had plotted the kill, waiting for him to burst through the doorway. And up the fire escapes Gimloe ran.

In his second of consumed action before his muscles shaped to the next attack, the thought hummed through Corcoran's brain as the bullets had hummed through the air: He's hunting me . . . Not me him. He's hunting me.

He shot twice at Gimloe running up and up, and then shoved pistol in pocket. He leaped for the sheds. His hands caught hold. He pulled his body up.

The flights of iron stairs were a temporary protection.



Sprinting upwards, he schemed the next move. Two more wasted bullets. Four of mine wasted. Only two of his. He'll get me. He isn't human.

He had never feared any one as this killer—this killer who was hunting him.

Above, faster than his pursuer, Gimloe had already gained a half flight on him since he had started up the stairs.

A half flight. Then—Johnny Gimloe who had muscles and nerves co-ordinated like a tiger's, would be waiting for him. And Corcoran knew, even as his breath rushed from his lungs, that this life of his belonging to the city, to himself, to his mother, to his wife and son, this life would be the target for the third bullet as soon as he reached the roof. There Johnny would be waiting, as he had waited before on the shed for him to come into sight, and into death. Knowing this, he still hurtled up the last flight. No Johnny. No Johnny.

Nothing. The dark sky built on top the building. What was there to do but follow the pattern of the hunter and the hunted?

No Johnny. He must be hiding behind the low roof wall, listening to his sounds, his pursuit, waiting to shoot death into him.

Police whistles shrilled from the bottom world. Johnny must kill him or be killed this night.

Must kill me. Jesus save me. He's no mother's son. Oh, save me. His stomach was walloped by the sudden fist of terror. The sweat massed on his face because there was still no Johnny.

The steps to the last landing . . .

He fell flat on the last landing and waited. And waited. Johnny, without sound, appeared, shot at him. And

he fired his last two bullets at the apparition, the force, the unhuman killer. Johnny, without sound, dropped out of sight. Shoulder burning. Corcoran staggered onto the roof.

He turned Johnny over. This was Johnny. No, it wasn't. Couldn't be young Johnny Gimloe. He couldn't believe that he had managed to kill this clever and dangerous animal. The wedge of face contorted. Blood spilled from the cruel mouth. And sound. The voice of a boy. "Mama, mama. . . ."

Corcoran listened to the boy's voice. He remembered his wife and son. And then he choked, utterly lonely, as if he also lay dying.



## THE BIG JINX

LISTEN, DOC, you been swell so I'm going to give you the inside story, the whole damn thing. That auto accident was no accident, doc. It was manslaughter and if you want to tell the coppers, okay. Whatever you say, doc. How long can a guy go up against the big jinx?

A year ago, I was in the hospital like I'm now. Maybe you read about it in the papers, that is if you read the sports section. Head injuries, almost a concussion of the brain, from my fight with Ted Griffo. Bad stuff, but I didn't cry. Somebody like me, an orphan kid out of the West Side, born like they say between the alley and soup-line, can take more than his share of grief without crying. I was K. O. Mibane and head injuries was part of the racket, the lousy part but a part. I might have been the next welter champ but I didn't cry. All I knew was I wanted no more fighting. The idea of stepping into the ring again made me sick. But it didn't make my wife sick. That's when I knew the jinx was starting.

Some guys have a family, an old lady, friends, somebody. Me, I was alone except for the wife. My friends were all a bunch of good-time Charleys. I was alone and the wife was still Mrs. K. O. Mibane. Aw, what's the good talking. There I was, one month out of the

hospital where Ted Griffo'd whammed me, one lil month, when she give it to me, my own wife. I can see her now, sitting on the couch like she was some place else, and me saying we had to move out of the hotel apartment. She didn't look good to me although she was a beaut. Take a look at her picture. A beaut. Aw, what's the good talking. I tell you she was innocent as a baby when we got married four years ago when I was Mr. Nobody himself in person, but she changed. She changed into a woman who had to have a big hotel apartment and a big car, and carry on big all the time. The wife of the next welter champ, Mrs. K. O. Mibane. So when I said we had to move and I had to get some kind of job, it was like I handed her a telegram saying we were both dead.

"Your job's to fight," she says, "like your manager says you ought to do." I didn't believe I was hearing straight. "Cora," I says. "I can't fight no more even if I wanted to. One good clout on the head and I might be a goner."—"Lightning don't hit twice in the same place," she says. I listened to her and I wondered who was doing the talking. That crack about lightning not hitting twice, was my manager's beef to me. He wanted me to fight again. Why not? I wasn't a human being to my manager. I was a bundle of money with two fists who could've been the welter champ, and still might be. But my own wife Cora? I couldn't believe she was the mouthpiece of my manager—the mouthpiece of the racket that pays off in gold at one window and in head injuries at the other window.

She left me, she went back to her folks, she said when I got sense in me she'd come back. Did it for my own good, she said. Jesus. For my own good.



I found myself a furnished room in the same block where I'd worked in Flotta's Garage and was fighting amateur. I got a job selling insurance, but with Cora gone, I felt like I was walking around on the bottom of the harbor. A guy like that can't sell insurance. The lil money I'd saved up—you see we'd spent fast as I made—it blew. I asked Flotta for a job but he acted like I was joking. Nobody wanted me. They'd all read the newspapers about my head injuries and my retiring from the ring. They figured I was punchdrunk. I was worse than punchdrunk. I was jinxed. I was jinxed not because I'd been thrown out of the money but because I couldn't forget my wife, and how her love for me'd changed into a love for the big-time I could no longer give her. I hacked awhile but couldn't make my quota. I got me a job as a bouncer and one night a lush yaps at me, "K. O. Mibane. Hey, K. O., you hear the lil birdies?" I gave it to the lush. He went down and I went out. Anyway, I don't think I would've lasted bouncing, having every stinking sog pointing the finger at me until I died. The life I was living without Cora was no life. I even thought of looking up my manager. He would've gotten some doctors to certify me and if luck was on my side, maybe I'd still get to be welter champ, and Cora'd be back with me. And if the luck went bad, at least I'd kick off like in the horse operas, with my boots on and my wife holding me in her arms. But when it came to go see the manager, I was afraid. I still had ringings in my head. I could still see Ted Griffo with tears in his eyes, begging me not to die. I was afraid.

Then I began to give myself a lil dream. I began to think if I could land a good job, maybe Cora'd come

back. I asked for my job selling insurance but they wouldn't give me a second try. That was when I went to see this big-time gambler, this operator Mitch Rush. I met this Mitch Rush about a year and a half ago when I'd run up a string of five k.o.'s and two decisions. He wanted me to throw my next fight, the one with Tex Krol who I knocked out in eight. "You'll be fixed for life," this Mitch says to me and he wasn't joking. There was twenty grand in the deal for me plus my share of the purse, and who was to stop me from betting it all against myself. I told him no and he says to me, "No fighter stays big. If a fighter's smart he collects when he can. You're going to be small one of these days." I told him no. Not because I was pure as your kid sister or any crap like that. I told him no because once you play under the table you aren't your own man any more. You're going to lose more fights and what I wanted was the championship, the glory, just like my wife. That championship to me was more than money, though. It was the chance to be somebody and not the lil nobody I'd been most of my life. A kid scrounging around in lousy jobs, and then the army, four battle stars, and for each star I paid a year of life, and getting out of the army and more lousy jobs, fighting amateur, then pro. That championship, I wanted it. "When I'm small," I says to this Mitch Rush, "I'll ask you for a job collecting numbers."—"Okay," he says. "It's a deal."

Of course he was just wisecracking, but I'd reached the point where I was operating strictly on off-chances. He might say no and he might say yes. These big-time racketeers, they're like kings, you can never tell about them. Well, he made me wait more than an hour before he'd see me. And there I was in the office where I'd



last been with five k.o.'s and two decisions under my belt, the championship before me like a sweet dream, and no head injuries in the cards, and no wife living with her folks. Mitch, he looked at me from behind his great big desk, and behind another desk was his secretary, the same one who'd been there when Mitch'd propositioned me. Some pair they were, two characters strictly off the pavement, Mitch, he could've been a business man or a lawyer, and the secretary was just a secretary, a little guy with sad eyes. The only thing odd about them was that they were wearing exactly the same dark suits like they'd been outfitted by the same tailor.

"K.O. Mibane," Mitch says to me and pushes a box of cigars across that big desk of his. But before I could take one, he hauls the box back. "I forgot," he says, "you have to keep in training." He was having a lil fun and I helped him along. I said I'd been whittled down to size just like he said I'd be, and how about that job collecting numbers. "What do you want to collect numbers for?" he says, "I seen you myself knock out Bill Malone and Ike Dobber. What'd they pay you to fake the head injuries for Ted Griffo?"—"Faked?" I says. "Yeh, I faked nearly dying too."

He smiled at me, a smile I don't know how to say it—a smile like he would've liked to see me dead. That smile was the giveaway. Big-time as this Mitch was, he could never forget my saying no to him. Nobody had the right to say no to him. He had all kinds eating out of his hand, coppers and politicians, and nobody said no to him. "I come here on the off-chance," I says, "I see I'm wasting your time."

"You're not wasting my time," he says, "I'll give you the job I promised." I had a hunch he meant it, and

because he meant it I felt the ice making inside of me like in the ring when you leave yourself wide open and know you'll get jolted in a second but it's too late. He pushed the cigars at me, he told his secretary to give me a light, and I felt ice making in me. "How's that for service?" he says. "Bet it makes you think you're K.O. Mibane and not a lousy has-been. Excuse me," he grins. "I shouldn't've said that. Proves I'm only human, don't it? Before you collect numbers for me, you first have to prove you can follow orders." Seems a gambling game'd moved into his syndicate's territory. This gambling game was not licensed by Mitch Rush and paid no tax to him. They had copper protection but not from Mitch's coppers. He was going to raid them and I was to drive the raid car. And he wanted me to get the car off the street. Off the street like I was a cheap heister.

He looked at me and laughed like he'd break his gut at the idea of me who'd turned down twenty grand, heisting a car. It did him good all right, my coming to him. I felt sick, I wanted to tell him to go to hell, but how could I? Collecting numbers was a good steady job and maybe Cora'd come back after awhile. "I didn't come here to heist cars," I says. "You got to prove you can follow orders," he says. "The job's yours but you got to prove it first." He pulled open a drawer in his desk. It was full of green paper like a bank window. He tossed me a brand new fifty and a brand new twenty. "There's your first week pay in advance," he says: "Get a car and when you do, let George know, has-been."

I shouldn't have picked up his money but seventy bucks a week was a good job. Better than hacking or bouncing in a bar. I could go to the wife and tell her I had seventy a week solid, every week, and maybe



things'd work out between us. Maybe she'd change back into the way she used to be. And that's what I wanted most.

George walked to me to the outer offices and the elevators. "I don't have to give you a tip," he says, whispering. "But I will. Don't get your car downtown. Too many cops, too many heisters. You take the subway to one of those big apartment neighborhoods in Brooklyn where the suckers drive the car into the garage themself. If you're stopped, you can say it's a mistake, you're drunk. If you're not, all you have to do is pick one and drive it down the ramp."—"Why the tip?" I says.

"Never mind why," he says. "I'll meet you at Tommel's Bar on Lex' around one tonight."

Like George said it was just as easy as that. For a ten cent subway fare I got myself a car. But what went on in my mind! But who cares what goes on in a guy's mind. The mind don't count. What counts is what's in the wallet. It was after one when I parked on Lex'. All around me the night was laying quiet, the traffic lights blinking green and red, green and red, like I'd never looked at them before, like they were saying something to me if I could only catch on. George was waiting for me at the bar, near the door. He said not a word but walked to a booth in the rear. I followed him past the guys at the bar, all the lonely bastards with no homes to go to and no women to go to, just like me. We sat down and George ordered a couple highballs. I said his tip was good and when did we start. He said not until tomorrow night. He said I should park the heisted car uptown in one of the side-streets where the coppers let the suckers park. I stood up to blow but he made me sit down and have a drink. We killed those drinks and I says, "Why'd

you give me the tip how to heist a car painless?"—"I was a fan of yours," he says, "No fooling, Mibane. When you upchucked on that twenty grand, you made a fight fan out of Mitch Rush. He was never one before, not even for Joe Louis, but you made one out of him."—"He went to see me get knocked out," I says. "Sure," George says, "Mitch bet against you. He took me along with his crowd. That's how I became a fan of yours. I bet on you. You was one fighter I knew there was no fix on and when Ted Griffo sent you to the hospital, I was blue like you was my own brother."

We had a bunch of drinks and we began to talk like guys who met in a bar like Tommel's. Like we'd known each other all our lives. And what with the whiskey in me, I began to tell him all my hard luck like God knows how many other bastards here at Tommel's spilling their grief, about my manager and my wife wanting me to fight, and how she left me and how I'd gone to see Mitch on the off-chance, praying for a job so maybe I could convince her to come back. "Why do you still want her?" George says to me. "I love her," I says. "She was an angel when I married her. I didn't have a dime left after I bought the ring. It was the racket changed her and maybe she can change back."—"You're a sucker," George says, "Like I might expect from a guy who upchucks on twenty grand. I shouldn't tell you this but why do you think Mitch wants to give you the collector job?"—"To give himself a big laugh," I says. "You know from nothing," he says, "Mitch wants you around to crawl for him. You bucked him which even the big-shots don't do. They're all zombies when it comes to Mitch but you bucked him. A few feel like bucking him but they keep their traps shut. I said nothing, you under-



stand."—"So he's made you crawl, George," I guessed. "I said nothing," he says, "I'm no guy like you in a hundred years. You might've been champ, you toss away twenty grand. Me, I'm nothing so what if I crawl. Everybody has to crawl except for a few."—But you don't like crawling." I guessed, "That's why you have a face like the morgue." "I'm nothing," he says, "but you spit on Mitch and his money, and now you're going to crawl. You're going to crawl low down, lower down than anybody else for you spit on him once and he'll never forget or let you forget. And for what? For a wife not worth a damn."—"She'll come back, she'll change," I yelled like he'd poured some kind of poison in the last drink. But he only laughed. "Change for a lousy seventy a week," he says. "Go ask her, sucker. Don't she want you to fight? The racket's got her and once the racket's got somebody, they're got, sucker."

I felt like I was crazy. I looked at this George with the sad eyes and I knew he was right about Cora. I thought how I'd get a face like the morgue, too, working for Mitch—and like George said, for what. He looked at me and he says, "What I told you about Mitch Rush you forget. I said nothing, understand? His voice was low and mean, and I knew I couldn't trust him even if he was a fan of mine. He was like a crawling snake wanting to be human but he'd always be a snake. He couldn't help it because he was owned by this Mitch Rush like the handkerchief in your pocket.

He didn't want a lift so I got into the hesitated car and watched him walk off. And I thought I was looking at myself, what I was going to be like, but worse, a hell of a lot worse. The seventy bucks no longer looked good to me, the job collecting numbers no longer looked

good to me, and it was George who'd made them look bad. This George who was my fan, my tip-off friend—he was my jinx, putting the evil eye on the chances of my wife coming back, jinxing me while making believe he was on my side. I started up the car, racing after him like a crazy man, and all I could think of was that once and for all I was getting rid of my jinx. He turned in the middle of the gutter and hopped out of the way. I missed him by inches. The sweat poured on me, not because I'd almost killed a guy but because as he turned he *smiled*. Maybe I was drunken dreaming, maybe the headlights shone off his teeth, making him seem like he was smiling. And something inside of me, the jinx feeling that could go *inside* when it wanted to, or show itself *outside* in somebody like George when it wanted to, kept on saying: Nothing'll ever go good with you and Cora for the racket's got you both.

I drove uptown to where Cora was living, parked the car, went up to her folks' apartment. I rang the bell and waited in that empty corridor with the quiet doors standing up like coffin lids. Her mother came to the door, all worried seeing me at that hour, but the something in me said what I had to say, and said it all over again to Cora. "I'm fighting next month," I says. "I had a few drinks to celebrate." She kissed me and says, "Johnny, you're your old self again," and her eyes, her eyes were full of love for me. But I could've cried at what's happened to my girl. She was her old self again, too, her old loving self. "Let's you and me get a bite," I says, "and I'll tell you all about it." Her old lady mumbled, but nothing in the world could've stopped me that night, for the jinx, *the jinx* was working for me at last.



Downstairs she asked me whose was the car. I said it was the manager's car, an old one of the manager's, and I'd been drinking with him to celebrate. She cuddled close to me in that heisted crate and she says, "Plenty fighters get a tough break and come back. Things'll be fine," she says. "Yeh, fine," I says. She asked me who I was fighting and that's when I said, "Cora, I can fight and take the chance of being champ or being dead."—"Johnny," she says, "Lightning don't strike in the same place."—"Let's not kid ourselves," I says, "I might be champ or I might be dead. That's one deal. I got a second deal."

We rolled up Broadway and down the dip to One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street where the subway comes into the open, and a late train was roaring by, all nose and a streak of yellow. I can see it now. Where was I? Oh, yeh, the second deal.

"Cora," I says, "I got a second deal, a job, a good job, seventy a week. We can live on it and maybe save a lil and do something else later on. The idea of fighting worries me sick."

Well, she said what you might've guessed. My manager was a fine manager, she said, and would pick fighters with no punch for me to come back on. She said I could learn a lot of boxing while fighting the powder-puffs so when I was matched with the sluggers, they wouldn't be able to touch me. Oh, she had me waltzing into the championship safe like I'd be in an armored car. And I knew George was one hundred per cent right and a funny idea popped in my mind about that George. This car we were in, didn't belong to a guy in Brooklyn but to George who'd tipped me how to heist it, to George

who'd tipped me about everything, to George who was trying to be human but never could be for he was something out of the morgue. This car was a death car and George was old man death himself with his sad eyes, making me understand it was no use struggling like I'd done since I was a kid, that nobody could lick the big jinx. And I knew something else, that only love can make any kind of show against the racket, my racket, any kind of racket, but the racket'd got her like George said, put its mark on her like it'd put its mark on me.

North we drove, passing the dark apartment houses on upper Broadway, and I could hear myself talking, or rather the something inside of me was doing the talking, while I was figuring to drive to Fort Tryon Park, the highest point in Manhattan where there was a spot lovers liked, where I'd been with Cora in the first car I owned, where a car could be rammed through the rail to tumble down and down, and end even the biggest jinx in the world. And when I knew exactly what I was going to do, I felt full of love for this wife of mine, and all I remembered about her was how she'd been in the first years before she was Mrs. K.O. Mibane. "I love you," I says. "I love you too Johnny," she says. I curved off Broadway toward the black slopes of the Fort Tryon neighborhood, and it was like a gate opening, like I was already with the next world. Still, it was, still and dark with the smell of the trees and grass and the night. "You're driving too fast," she says but I stepped down hard on the gas pedal. The car jumps like I hit it with a club. I aim for the rail, the rail to kingdom come. She screamed and I remember letting go the wheel, putting my arms around her, and seeing George's face with the sad eyes, seeing him picking us both up stone dead.



That auto accident was no accident. Doc, I killed my wife and yet I didn't kill her. That's what's driving me mad, doc. The racket killed her before I did, the big jinxing racket.

## *RED MIKE, MABEL AND ME*

THAT WAS the summer when the ward heeler dropped into my father's office and said: "I hear you're out for a chauffeur. Why don't you take on a lad I know? Red Mike. True and who's denying it the lad's been up the river as you might say, but he wants to go straight and he's a champ mechanic."

The rest of the family were in the country and only myself in town, my father being the kind of man who had to eat his meals with a member of the family. We didn't see much of each other outside of restaurants but the arrangement gave both of us a secure feeling of hearth and home. Neither of us had what is known as a cool judgment. I was chasing girls with my father calling me a fool but getting a kick out of it. That summer he was making a fortune altering tenements all through the West Side. We took Red Mike on although we might have known fellows like Red couldn't go straight in a million years. They hadn't been bred to go straight.

He went swell with the car. We had a brand-new Packard that year and with him in the driver's seat, the ensemble had a tough sort of class. My father seldom used the car so before I knew it we were buddies. He'd drive the old man downtown every morning and then



shoot back for me. I'd take a shower while he sat on the edge of the bathtub cracking dirty jokes. After breakfast we'd tank her up with gas and be ready for anything in the skirt or broad-way line as Red used to say.

My classmates were at the seashore or fishing or something and here was a fellow ready-made to hang out with. He was about twenty-six with a long narrow head and the blond baby skin that sometimes goes with red hair. He'd been a pug, a dance-hall bouncer, a mechanic, and recently a stick-up man and jailbird, and whenever he could he ordered Yankee pot roast.

I soon found out he hadn't cut loose from his sticky-fingered pals and I couldn't hold it against him. You can't pan charity. Charity is a leading virtue. It was this way. Almost every week we'd drive over to the Tombs. I'd wait in the car while he paid a visit on some pal. All his pals were in the Tombs for reckless driving. He showed me the stone eagle on Riverside Drive that had jinxed many of them. They'd smack into it and the fly cops would be hauling them in for driving while intoxicated. Red would snag a dollar or two out of me with a promise that I should take it out of his wages. But it was charity and we were too intimate, sneaking the car out nights to hit the West Side hot spots.

That's when I really snapped awake—when we were down in the middle of the summer night, the tenement people sitting out on the stoops sucking lemon ices, all the side streets off Eighth and Ninth Avenues taking on a foreign exciting look, men sleeping on the fire escapes, kids bathing in the hydrant spouts and shooting columns of water at passing cars, everybody laughing, the air steamy, the dresses clinging to the women, well, I don't know how to express it but I just came alive. I played at

being another rough guy like Red, two gangsters on the lam, two toughs in the sugar. When we parked the slick Packard, hopping out dressed to beat the band, our faces smelling of bay rum, and the sweating ginks looking us over, their young women lifting up their breasts at sight of us, well, I wouldn't have swapped Red for the best guy in the world. He'd slip two bits to some kid to mind the car and see they didn't let the air out of the tires or light matches on the mudguards. We'd walk to the joint and I'd give Red back the quarter he'd laid out. "See," said Red. "Why pay two bits to them parking guys? I'd rather let one a-them kids get me dough."

Mostly we hung out in a joint off Tenth Avenue called The Smoky. It was a sort of cabaret specializing in phony drinks the bartender invented. The Belly Smasher, the Smoky which was mostly gin and tasted like dynamite, the Green Sin which had some absinthe in it. It was strictly a neighborhood joint. They didn't want outsiders. West Side boys in the money would drag their dames here. The stags were taken care of by three girls supplied by the house. You could buy them drinks, take them out, and then it'd be up to you how far you went.

We never brought any dames because Red was nuts about one of these girls, the one called Mabel. We three would sit at a table drinking beers or fizzes depending on what Red said was good for his kidneys, and I'd be feeling like a real go-to-hell, and adventurer, watching the guys get even for the high tariff by the way they worked their dames, and I'd be awful jealous of Red because he was number one with Mabel and I was number eighty or something. She was the girl Red used to go out with before he was sent up the river. I guess they loved each other but it was O.K. for both of them to have me join



the party and even to take her out. "Hey Mabel," he said the first time. "Here's a guy been going around with soft piles of chicken bones, foldup babies, the kind always drinking bromos. Be sweet to him."

We three would sit together and she'd pet me with one free hand, for Red had the other, and I'd be thinking I was a champ rummy. But it was hard to think straight in The Smoky. The bartender hollering, the waiters in dirty black coats slipping among the dancers with drinks and planked steaks, kidding or goosing a guy they knew. It was rough and ready, the radio screaming its head off, and then some drunk would fiddle around with the dials and he'd be getting the bum's rush while everyone laughed and kissed their dames. Everyone belonged to the big time; you got money to spend it in The Smoky.

I danced a lot with her. I'd have her body in my arms, and she was beautiful, slender and strong, her face coming to a point at the chin, her large blue eyes never dreamy or gushy but hard, always looking cold at people as if she was hep to everything that happened since Adam. Right away I saw she couldn't ever make me number one. I might have fun with her now and then, all in the way of business, but it was Red she was daffy about. That summer I was ready to fall in love with some girl different from those I'd known. When we were through dancing she'd park near Red or take his arm and I'd feel like all the fools that ever lived. Seeing I was second fiddle for keeps, I'd get more stewed. I made believe I was sleepy. It was better that way. Everything would get to look dreamy, the bartender inventing new drinks, the couples inching around on the floor and calling it dancing. Getting dreamy that way I didn't mind so much when he put his arm around her, half of his mouth

smiling, the rest of his face hard and set. I wished I was a crook or gunman so she'd love me.

All the time, she knew I was making believe I was sleepy, for she'd stare at me now and then in a way that had me blushing and I was lucky I was flushed up from booze. She seemed to say with her eyes, if you don't like it, lump it. "Why don't you go home?" she said.

"Aw he's a good kid," said Red. "Love him up a lil." He laughed. "When I ain't around. Hey, guy, mind taking the boat home? Me and Mabel's going up to Mabel's room." I heard this phony joke all summer and laughed at the nerve of both of them dumping the bills on me and then grabbing the fun.

"I don't rate, that's all," I said.

He'd holler for Rose. Rose was Mabel's pal. "Take care of this guy." That'd be the last I'd see of him until the next morning when he'd crack his jokes as if everything was hunky-dory.

Rose always led off the same way. "Have a drink," she said, rubbing her knees up against mine under the checkered cloth. I'd lean on my elbows and holler like a drunken fool.

"You're not bad but I'm getting gypped if ever a guy was."

"We all get gypped, honey. What about it?"

"They've tipped you off I've got dough."

"Ain't dough all right?" she said. "All right for both of us."

The next day I'd wake up with a dead mouth and something mean and dead in my heart and listen to Red tell how he drove my old man downtown and what my old man said.



"Where you going?" I said hating him for the rocking I'd brought on myself.

"A pal a-mine's in the Tombs. Speeding—"

"Why do all your pals drive so fast? It's a wonder that eagle hasn't been shoved into the Hudson."

"It's a tough eagle. Say, what's up? Rose too rough?" He pulled me out of bed, goosing me all the way into the shower bath until I was roaring and cursing.

When he came back from visiting his pal, he was wearing a big Masonic pin in his lapel. "Me boss is a Mason and what's good for the boss—"

"You'll be in the Tombs for speeding," I said, "if you don't watch your fingers. Why'd you do it?"

"I see an uncle in a hock shop and it was so hot I goes out in to cool off. He had a tray full a-them pins. Don't give it me, uncle, I tell him, I'll bust your window six times a week. He gimme it."

And because I was sore at him about Mabel I saw him as he was. He was a guy like a cat. When a cat spotted milk or meat or a female cat he had to go for it. But he was a damn good guy just the same. Once, driving out to the family for a week end we got into an argument with another car and when we pulled over, we had to keep Red from biting their heads off. But that had nothing to do with other things. Like a cat he had no responsibility. My father'd been bred to plan and figure, specifically to seize opportunities in the real-estate and contracting lines. Red had been bred to grab everything loose. We shouldn't've hired him in the first place. A man with sense, not a fool like me or a generous softy like my father, would have known it had to happen.

That boom-time summer, my father's office was the hangout for a mob of lawyers, accountants, real-estate

men, contractors. They'd get together every afternoon and play twenty-one, pinochle and stud poker. There'd be two or three games going at the same time. When he wasn't with me Red used to watch the gamblers. My father wouldn't let him sit in the car, it was too hot, but had him up in the office where a battery of electric fans would be going full blast and the concession man running up with batches of sandwiches, cigars and cold beer.

I can imagine Red looking those money men over. I guess the sight of so much money won and lost as if it were tissue paper was too much for him. Here, these rich men, all sporting diamonds, betting real jack, and laughing if they lost. It was like a cat seeing a saucer of grade-A cream.

The stick-up went off like a song. Three days later Red threw up the job. The bulls were beginning to nail their hard glims on him. And two weeks later he and two mobsters were nabbed breaking into a warehouse. That was the end of him. He was slated for a stretch up the river. They never proved he was in on the stick-up of my father's place, but we guessed he was behind it. One of the guys caught at the warehouse was identified by a lawyer and a plumbing boss. We agreed he'd tipped off his pals, got his split and then gone after more easy money.

I didn't go to see him. I was sore because he'd betrayed us, although I can see now he hadn't doubled-crossed us after all. He'd reacted blindly to the chance of easy money. I caught on to things. I didn't feel I was another tough egg. My father got a colored chauffeur from a high-class agency, and from that time on the gas bill wasn't so high. I moped around for a week or so. It was



August, the air muggy and my father hounding me to go up to the country.

The night before I left I went over to The Smoky for the last time. It wasn't the same thing without Red. I didn't belong. With him I felt I had belonged to the streets and tenement dames and all the hot aching hard-boiled life of the West Side. I'd been kidding myself. You couldn't belong unless you were dirty-poor and brought up in filth and trying to snag some money.

Mabel came over and I ordered beer. "Red and I are through for keeps and it's all his fault. He had a good job."

"Sure he did." She didn't seem to give a damn about him or anything else as if she'd been wound up like a pretty doll just to get ahead in life having a good time. Then, suddenly I had an idea she was hurt for all her kidding.

"You don't fool me. You're in love with Red, aren't you? And I know why. You're the same kind, from the same street, went through the same mill, and if he gets clipped it's almost like you getting clipped."

"You're the guessing kid," she said. She patted the tablecloth with both hands and then looked up. "It's like this. You take things as they come. Here today and all the rest of it. You got no time to gripe. Things happen. And that's all. The poor guy. No luck, no breaks. And it's all luck and breaks, see? It's like this. He started from nothing. Fight all the time. He wanted to go straight but you can't go straight on bread and water, not if you want other things. Like you have for instance. I want to go straight but not on bread and water so I work here and play guys like you for suckers. My old man and old lady was straight, so what? They'll die in the gutter. They got

nothing for it but the gutter, see. But Red and me we're the same kind. We got guts to try for other things but bread and water."

I saw her blue eyes, which had turned soft and perplexed like a child's, harden. She was Mabel again. And I knew inside of me like a great sweeping wind of knowing that she and Red and others like them could only keep going day after day because they let the facts bind them in and were glad of facts, looking neither behind nor ahead. I understood her, I wasn't sore at Red. I thought of the facts of this minute, of us two. She needed money for clothes, for a living. I had money. Those were the facts of this minute. Nothing else counted. Her eyes sized me up. Her pink tongue moistened her lips and I knew she was honest and would give me my money's worth. We got up to dance and I felt her breasts digging in my chest, her body against mine. I heard the radio playing, smelled the smoke and gin and beer and these were all facts and all that counted. I thought of what a fool I'd been to get a kick out of slums and tough guys like Red and girls like Mabel, to think them romantic. It was all hard facts for them, for all the people in the West Side. It was sweat and blood and the poor-house, a stretch up the river for Red, some crummy old house for Mabel, and hunger and pain for most of them all their lives. They just didn't have the money, the chance in life to keep the facts from getting them, and the jazz was bursting around me in The Smoky, I was dancing, and when I looked at her she smiled cold and wise sort of and I knew she was playing me for all I was worth, and I could have cried out at the hell of it but kept on dancing.

I went up to the country the next day, the big clean



hotel with its troops of waiters, the gardens, the lake, the happy well-dressed crowds of guests all having a good time, so it seemed like a fairyland to me and I couldn't believe there was a West Side at all, and I understood how it must have looked to Red when he drove my father and me up for a week end.

## PIGEON FLIGHT

HE MADE a racket running up the stairs, stamping his feet, and who wouldn't? Zixo was the best pigeon he ever had. As his palm slid on the bannister, his big ring handy for socking a guy tapped out an irregular Morse code on the smoothness. It was all shadow and dark smell in the tenement and his noise was like sunlight.

On the fourth floor some old cow had heard him. A rectangle of light lay like a hearth rug in front of her open door. Her corpulence almost corked up the aisleway. She was gripping the bannister, peering at him with eyes so sly and twinkling they couldn't have been any other color but blue. Her pale face seemed to lack all hard confines, but it was so flabby and jowled.

"Lemme pass," he said, as if to say: Take it easy. I'm tough. She smelled old to him and he had no use for her.

He smelled young to her, his flesh rosy, sleek with the shine of the natural oil in his skin. He was hatless, his hair sandy, his chin irritatingly belligerent because he wouldn't take guff from anyone. They glared at each other like a pair of hostile cats meeting in the same corridor.

"Where you goin', wakin' up the dead with your clatter?"



"To the roof, lady. Say, lemme pass. I got business with the guy, there."

"Then, it's pigeons." She smiled, knowing all about him. "And ye're another like the guy. God's curse on me why I ever moved four flights up and near the roof for him to be flyin' his pigeons night and day."

Charley laughed. "So your boy's a pigeon fancier?"

"Fawncier," she mocked. "A gent fawncier. The hell he is. He's a no-good loafer and that's what your mother says of you if it's a truth you tell. How long since you been workin', you young scamp?"

"Say, lady, I make money flying pigeons," he said with the dignity of a bank clerk.

"Gwan up, impudence. Tell the fawncier the landlord's in the house to fix the roof, and for him to let the poor man alone."

On the fifth landing, an iron ladder went up to the roof and a square of blue sky. Jesus, it's hot, thought Charley, hope he's got my Zixo. He got his heavy ring ready.

The old lady's son was sitting on a crate under a lean-to of planks swiped from the lumberyards. The chimney was used as tentpole and wall. His back was against the red bricks, his feet crossed in shadow, and he was trying to look like a bigshot. He yawned, walking out in the sun to stare up at his flock as if he were a gent clocking one of his nags.

Charley sneered at the flock. He didn't have much, maybe twenty or thirty sailing elegant over the slum. And his lean-to wasn't much with its clumsy architecture of planks and grocery boxes. But, he, himself, was something else, young as he was. Better not use the ring right off the bat, thought Charley. He was big and fat, a tough

fat guy carrying his weight like another power. A regular fat bear with his eyes blue as shining water in the sun. Take it easy, thought Charley, that punk hefts a sock.

The roofs of the district, tarred monotonous decks, sailed away flatly in all directions like a fleet of ships exactly the same, the chimneys russet-brown, the wash-lines waving white underthings like flags. The sky was intolerable with blue heat. The Hudson, blue green, in the distance was a wall between green New Jersey high on the Palisades like an inaccessible land, and the district anchored like an abandoned fleet.

Charley got to feeling mad at the punk and his damn bossy airs and damn fat pokerface. All these kids pasted on pokerfaces and thought they were the nuts. Why, the fat fag'd never shaved even. "I fly pigeons. My name's Charley. One of my pigeons got loose and I spotted him heeling for this coop."

"He have a name?"

"What you think I'm doin' here? I've been flying them before you could tell a pigeon from a hole in the ground."

"You don't know nuthin' about me." He popped out of his lean-to, formidable as his shadow. "I'm the boss o' the roof here so min' your step." He towered half a head bigger than Charley and his shoulders would've got him a longshoreman's job. His blue eyes were peeping small stones hard as his fists.

"You're rough, ain't you? But let's get back to business. This pigeon's called Zixo. My initials C.S. are stamped on the tag on his foot. I've covered most of the roofs in this territory, and maybe you got him? Dark grey with a hardboiled walk. You know?"

"Commere and take a look at your Zixo."

"No kidding?"



"You want Zixo or don't you?"

Charley hurried to the lean-to. The boards were nailed any old whichway. That punk was lazy. There were grey feathers on the bottom of the coop, and yop, there was Zixo striding among the feathers. Jesus, he was lucky, with Zixo stepping high and dark grey among the light grey birds, his eye bright and red. "Pull him out, will you?"

"You bet." He reached down the trap-door, nabbing the bird with his big mitt. The delicate head nodded unafraid. "I hauled him in with my flock two days ago." He slanted his eyes up at the birds floating in air like a magic carpet. "You got your two bits?"

"I'll owe it to you." He reached out his hand but the other immediately opened the trap and slipped the pigeon back in the coop.

"Cash or you don't get Zixo. That's the rule all over this part o' town. Two bits for strays, or, finders keepers." His face was emotionless (the times he must've practiced that pokerface, thought Charley) but his voice was a brawl of words.

"Lucky for you I know your old lady."

"You don't know her."

They catwalked away from the coop out on the bubbling tar. The air was hot summer. The pigeons soared fastidiously like a crowd in evening dress, wondering where to spend the night.

"How long you flyin' pigeons?" said Charley.

"Three years. Two bits for Zixo. And how long you flyin' when you don't know the rules?" He weaved in, his shadow hot-black. "I'm sick o' your talk. One more crack and I'll lump you."

"Don't have to be nasty. You'll get your two bits." Charley smiled. "Let's forget it."

"I don't get your gorillas. What'd you wanta rough it for?" They sat down on boxes under the shade of the lean-to, dreamy with summer, listening to the dry sounds of the pigeons strutting in the coop. "Those new ones in there'll be ready for flyin' soon. I been feedin' them four days."

"Then you let them fly and three outa ten never come back. They ain't nuthin' I don't know about flying pigeons. Flying them five years since I was sixteen. Hey, I look older'n twenty-one."

"Nawl! You don't."

"You. Why you don't look more'n sixteen." It was a satisfaction watching the pokerface wrinkle with anger.

"I'm eighteen."

"Come up to my roof some time and I'll show you a house. And I got near a hundred in my flock. I sell ten average to the butcher every week, besides those I give to my old lady when she squawks, 'Why don't I go to work.' Say, your old lady said before, the landlord's coming up to fix the roof. On my roof the landlord has to write for permission."

But the kid had lammed out in the sun swift as a kick. "Hawk," he hollered. Far up in the blue reach, too high in dazzle and sky to be a pigeon, a solitary blackness was winging. He had grabbed the twenty foot bamboo lying on the roof, and had begun circling it in air. The white decoy rag tied on the end of it fluttered.

"That's no hawk," yelled Charley.

"Is one."

Maybe it was with the summer slow and greedy, and the hawks pirating out of Interstate Park across the river.



Wild birds were tougher hunting than pigeons. Charley thought, now was the time to fetch Zixo and scam off and save two bits. But blinking at the anxious face that wasn't a pokerface any more, he didn't have the heart.

The kid was waving the bamboo. The little white rag was like a wing. And some of the dumb pigeons were following its flight with red eyes. What'd they think it was? The boss pigeon? The main flight coasted in emptiness with not a worry in their heads. Three or four birds spiralled down to investigate the rag. Others followed. Finally the fascinated flock undulated like a grey wave in the yellow sun to the movements of the decoy. The kid was working them swell. He sank the pole in dandy slow motion to the roof wall. The white rag skipped on brick. A dozen birds folded up their wings, alighting, their gaudy feet pompous, nodding their heads like so many old fools.

"Hawk's comin' down like hell on wheels," cried Charley.

Nearer and nearer, the big bird whatever it was, bolted down the sky impelled by a Jovian lust. It was a hawk. Charley jiggled up and down, blinking at the hypnotism of the bamboo. "He loves fat pigeon."

Now, the pigeons rising up and down in blue as if on wires pursued the rag even to the coop. It was more than a rag. It was a leader, a mighty pigeon. The sun glinted the purples and greens on their breasts into splendor. The rag drooped to the coop again. The flock crowded on the wired top, forgetful of their purpose, the flash of brain lost. They were stupid birds all of a sudden, obedient to the pole shoosing them towards the opened trap. One by one they dropped in.

"Damn," roared the kid. He had been too autocratic with the pole. Two pigeons winged up from safety into blue danger. The hawk was wheeling philosophically thirty stories up, with an eye on everything.

Charley groaned, thinking of that bright bitter eye contemplating the dumb pigeons. A kid was a kid after all. He should've worked them easy. "Take it easy, guy."

The kid trotted up and down the roof, twisting the bamboo into the sky's belly. The white rag flew. But the pigeons seemed ill at ease as if missing the numbers of the flock, giddy at the two of them sailing alone. They chased upward away from the decoy. The brown devil tore down like a dropping airplane. The bill was curved and polished in the sun. "Damn, damn," cried the kid, close to tears. He was running up and down madly. His finesse had flopped.

The pigeons didn't see a blame thing, the dumb city birds, too petted and spoiled to know better. The hawk dropped down its immense parabola of purpose. The claws sank, held like grapnels. The hawk ascended the parabola. The geometry was beautiful and complete.

"No pigeon ever flew that high," said the kid. "He'll gobble him up in the Palisades." For a long time he watched the grey plumage that had been inexorably united with the brown. The roofs of the district vanished from under the hawk's flight. It was a speck over the Hudson. A tug was bellowing hoarsely and they listened as if it were the pigeon crying to them. The speck was gone. It was easy luring the surviving bird into the coop.

"He's a goner," said Charley. "I got a gun for them hawks but no one can shoot them."

The kid had his pokerface on again, peering down at his flock. He opened a sidedoor, examined their tags,



"Irene or Glossy?" But he already had guessed which one was gone. "He got Jojo."

They heard people climbing the iron ladder. The poker-face turned bitter. He grabbed a brick and rushed for the climbers, glaring down. "It's only me," said a voice. A broad peaceful German head appeared above the roof level. "Only me, the landlord, with the roofer. I want to show him where you tore the roofing so it leaks on Mrs. Pilsudski so she complains. Your mama says for you to let me, please."

"Get the hell down or I'll bean you. No fixin' now."

"You pigeon loafers are a terror." He puckered his lips. "I'll tell your mama. I'll tell a cop."

"Beat it."

The landlord disappeared. Charley approved. "That's the way. That's being a king of the roof. And I'm sorry about Jojo. I know how it is."

The kid smiled queerly. "I gotta tell you something. That bird of you'n, Zixo, I ain't got him. I et him up. I eat all the strays. All I did was take off the band and put it on one of my new ones. I was gonna take your dough for a new one. You're square so I'm tellin' you. I et Zixo."

Charley didn't feel so good. He chewed a hunk of hot tar and thought he'd had Zixo two years and that was a helluva long time. He leaned against the roof wall, blinking at the kid's hairless face. What could a kid know? Never shaving yet or seen anything. "Never do that again. You're not long in the business or you'd know it's a rule to hold strays till a guy comes for them. Suppose I'd eaten your Jojo?"

He fidgeted. "I'm sorry. Jesus, I am. I'll give you any two birds for nuthin'." He dropped the brick.

"I got a hundred," said Charley with the air of one

whose fabulous wealth cannot be appreciably increased. "It's over with, kid, and you got to take things as they come."

They talked under the lean-to until the twilight breeze carried the green smell of the Palisades and the salty river tang into their nostrils. Then, the old lady began to holler up. "Hey, Tommy, come and eat. Yer supper's cold." They went down the dank flights.

"I could stay on a roof for years," said the kid shyly. "I like flyin' 'em." He seemed younger in the tenement shadow.

"So long," said Charley. "You're a real king o' the roof but you got to come down the street sometimes. There's beer, and a nice lil dame's juicier'n any pigeon."

The kid put on his pokerface. "I'll tell you a real secret. When I quit pigeons I'm goin' to get a job drivin' a beer-truck. I'll have dough and the dames better watch their skirts." His voice was deep, he was trying, successfully, to look tough.

"Not bad," said Charley. He skipped down the flights, tapping his ring hard on the bannister, glad to be getting down in the street himself.



## CRAZY KID

LARRY SAID hello, one of his eyes still puffy, the other hard and insolent as a doll's, shining bright in the sun.

Hello, said the gang, edging away from the punk. A guy had to watch his step in this burg. Hanging out with Larry was plain dumb. They were leaning against the corner Coffee Pot, four young men in suits so tight the buttons hollered when you put away a big meal. The collars of their shirts were worn open. Underneath the slogan; Today's Special: Roast Beef and 3 Vegetables—20¢: their hats, manners and expressions were exactly alike.

Babe wanted to tell Larry to beat it, but hell knows, that punk was liable to haul off and bust you one. Babe crowded closer to his pals. But it wasn't easy making believe Larry was a ginzo or a Greek. His bright blue eyes, even the bloodshot one, had a trick of snapping them back on their behinds like a smack in the puss. Punks nutty enough to stick up crap games ain't laughed off so easy.

"The stinkalorium boys," said Larry.

"Aw, peddle it some other place."

"You're a pretty boy, Babe. I'd like to kiss you."

"I don't get blinkers," Babe said. "You musta been nuts

to hold up Mitch's place. An' they'll be stickin' your conk in a milk can one of these days'n dump you in the river."

"Naw," grinned Larry, showing his teeth to all of them, his good eye shining flat and steely as the trolley tracks so that none of them could guess at anything soft behind it. They hung their heads and hoped to hell he'd beat it. A guy couldn't afford to be seen with him. Finally, he got the idea and walked off.

"Soon we can go swimmin' off the docks," said Ray.

"Grow up, wontcha," said Babe, sighing. He couldn't work off Larry so easy. He was griped at his respect for Larry. Him, he Babe, who didn't give a damn about nothing. Why, the cop said hello to him as if he were a big-timer. "He'll get killed one of these days. Imagine stickin' up guys that know him."

Ray couldn't get Larry either. Ray flew pigeons. Babe helped a bartender clean up mornings. They knew what was what. And now Murph, who worked a policy slip runner, narrowed his eyes like a real guy in the know. "Mitch wanted to kill him, fix his wagon for keeps, but then he lets him off only whaling the hell outa the punk." He glanced at Bill whose standing was as good as his own. Bill hung out in a clip-joint, chasing out for sandwiches and booze for the dames and their customers.

"Larry's just a plain lousy rat," said Bill.

None of them was over twenty, none worked (working meant an eight hour day like a shipping clerk or something like). They were all on the make, all with an eye peeled, and naturally a guy like Larry . . . Now, supposing the runner or the bartender or the P.I. happened along and seen them with Larry? There'd be hell. Guys holding up crap joints. Larry was crazy.

The breeze sucked inside Larry's collar. He felt his



puffy eye. It was getting better. He thought of the crap joint he'd robbed. ("Hell, Larry," hollered Mitch. He was fifty-percent owner. "Put that thing away." But Larry'd made him stick his mitts up and all the other guys' mitts, grabbing the dough on the pool table, then running for it. Three days later he'd blown most of it on a dame called Mitz. Some of Mitch's pals picked him up. They couldn't get him at all. If he must stick up guys that knew him why didn't he lay low? A screw was loose. They had done him a big favor only knocking hell out of him. Mitch had wanted to kill him.) Larry thought of the stinkalorium guys, his mind fading into warm haze. He had as little use for the past as an animal.

From the west and the river, the tugs were sounding. Then, there was that guy Merkel, a lousy small time policy book, and that guy was in Florida. Larry thought of Merkel and Florida because he needed dough right off the bat.

When he got home supper was cooking in big pots. He hurried into the room he shared with two younger brothers, his mother tagging after him. "Where you goin' with supper bilin'?" Her anxiety was almost formalized. She looked as if she were saying: Mister Sun, why do you shine? her son as distant from her as anything in nature.

"Shut up. I gave you dough las' week."

"An' gets yerself beat up fer it a couple days later."

"I don't want supper." He watched her go into the kitchen. He pushed the dresser away from the wall. Behind the mirror he had fastened a small screw. Suspended from it in one of those small holsters used by kids for cap pistols, he kept his gun. Larry opened up his vest. He slipped the gun in. It was hard and cool against his chest like Mitz's hand. He buttoned his vest thinking of her.

He walked uptown. It was after five and people were coming from work, their stiff faces softening as they strolled in the light giddy air. He ate a ham sandwich, thinking in the cafeteria that Mitz was always in at six even if six was deader'n hell. That dame like dough . . .

"Where you been hidin' yourself," Mitz said. She was twenty, no old bag, but with a soft peachy skin that was peachy even around the neck. That was how you could tell whether they were really young or not.

"I ain't got a cent but I'm knockin' off a big piece of change tonight, Mitz. How about credit?" He sidled towards her as if he were going to smack her smiling face.

"Ask Joe," she said, rolling her belly inside the thin dress. Joe sat in the parlor, a big fat ginzo wearing dirty spats.

"When you expec' to git dough?" Joe asked.

Larry was an iron cock of the walk that second. "Soon."

"Oke. We take you on. T'ings is slow, huh."

Mitz and Larry went into the adjoining bedroom. They liked each other and both of them knew what was what. There was something terrible in their knowledge. He slapped her hip, kissed her warm mouth. "The joint's a stinkalorium—"

"How much dough you gonna pull down, honey?"

"Plenty, Mitz. You know I can get it for nothin' but I comes here anyway. I like the build." His hand was as practiced and mechanical as an old man's. "You like Florida?"

"So what?"

"Laugh your head off. Talk to a shirt without a bank-roll."

"So you're gonna take me to Florida?"

"Where else would a guy like me go?"



"Who smacked you in the eye? Ain't you takin' the vest off, bigshot?"

When he was gone she told Joe, "This spring weather makes 'em goofy. Say, that kid had a gat in his vest some kinda way right next his hide."

Joe folded his tabloid. "He sticks up crap games."

"Jesus, yeh?"

"That's how he got dough couple weeks ago."

"You're nuts givin' him credit," she said.

"Sometime, wanna them crazy kids hits big."

"Wanna go to Florida he says to me."

"Some of them get there if they hit luck. If they don't what the hell. Maybe they're right instead of slavin' your God damned life away for pennies."

Larry sat on a bench in Central Park. There was a smell of earth and new budding leaves. Florida with Mitz. Florida with the stinkaloriums eating their hearts out.

A little after eight he went up a furnished rooming house on a side street. He rang the bell. A heavy face with two black eyes peered out at him.

"You're boss o' the joint. Hanley, ain't it?"

"How you know?" said the face.

"Mitch over Tenth told me you got a good game."

"You know Mitch? Well." He opened the door. It was too early for a game just as Larry had figured. In another room he saw a miniature pool table with several pairs of dice shining red on the baize cloth.

"Up with your hands. Up with them. Snappy." The gun was in his fists. His eyes glittered glassily in the electric light.

Hanley's fingers were tense, wide apart with hate. Larry held the gun close to his side. "Don't make a move,

Hanley." With his free hand he went through Hanley's pockets, pulling out a roll of greenbacks, the fading money for the night's game. Hanley was muttering from a blood-red face, a vein like a crooked branch in his forehead. The bell rang. A customer? Too early. Hanley's feet stood where they were planted but his upper torso, leaning forward, seemed to fling itself at Larry.

"Stay where you are. I'll let him in."

Again the bell rang. Larry shoved his gun in his pocket where the barrel made a point. He unlocked the door. The stranger, as if sore at waiting, maybe a little drunk slammed the door hard against Larry's shoulder, and just then Hanley, seeing the vicious gun point deflected from his heart, the stick-up kid off balance, charged swift and vengeful. Larry fired, missed, struggling to get the gun out as Hanley smacked into him, his fists striking out at Larry's chin. Larry sagged against the wall, reeling. Hanley ripping the gun from his hand, Hanley's breath hot on his face. All the time the newcomer had gazed outside the door. After his first act of slamming in the door, he appeared to be entranced, watching the fight with an attitude of: I've done plenty, let the other guy do something.

"Come in'n shut that door," said Hanley. The newcomer did so. Hanley jammed the gun in his pocket, pulling the groggy kid to a couch. "We showed you a good fight."

"Aw, Hanley," said the newcomer.

"You yellor bastard. You think that was a blank gun? And you gettin' a fat living workin' here."

"Aw, Hanley."

"Gimme a drink, Mike." Hanley smiled angrily. "Lucky you came or this stick-up skunk'd've walked off with the bank-roll. The lousy rat." He pulled Larry into the room



with the pool table, shaking him violently. Larry opened his eyes. He rammed a hard one to his gut. The wind oozed from Larry's lungs but his eyes remained open. "Not so tough without the gat. You know Mitch, you damn rat?" He thought a second, gripping Larry by the coat collar, standing over the prostrate body like a brutal colossus, the vein in his forehead throbbing. "Hey, Mike, call up Mitch over Tenth."

"No luck," whispered Larry, "or I'd amade it."

Hanley stared. "Crazy. It ain't fun stickin' me up. Maybe you don't know that. You shot at me, you bastard."

"Aw, go to hell."

The nickel tinged in the slot outside in the corridor. Mike came back. "I got him on the wire."

"You watch the kid." He clipped Larry on the jaw, pulled down his arms and hit him twice with his fist. The arms were quiet. Larry was out again, lying on the floor. Hanley hurried to the phone. "A crazy kid, says he knows you, pulling a gat on me. This minnit. Would've got away but for dumb luck." He listened to the voice on the other end of the wire going nuts. Finally the voice said to hold the kid until he got over.

Mitch and his pals came over like a shot, Mike nodded to the inside room. Larry was tied up, his mouth gagged so tight his jaws were pushed apart. Mitch and his pals knew the rat right off. One of Larry's eyes was still puffy from Mitch's fist. Larry looked up at them, at Mitch, cold, sombre, black, like the principal in public school who used to slam him around when the teachers sent him up. Larry was fazed.

Mitch explained to Hanley. "He stuck us up coupla weeks ago. We slough him. Now, he clips you." He

turned on his pals with disgust. "You said a lickin'd teach him a lesson. Like hell."

Hanley's thick shoulders sagged. "He shot at me. If that dope Mike hadn't pushed the door and spoiled his aim, I'd abeen sunk."

Mitch's eyes were deep as wells, and yet solid, without reflection. "Let'm loose and he'll kill somebody yet. The kid's a rat."

The men were all against him, their silence stating a moral code that had no mercy for him. His begging eyes said: Let me go. I'll behave.

"No use," Mitch said, answering those eyes. "I told you what'd happen if you tried it again." No one said Justice but their hanging heads were like those of a jury.

"He almos' got me," said Hanley. "I got a wife'n kids. Bad enough the way business is, and now with loonies like him." He shivered, the veined tree on his brow hung with drops of sweat.

Larry's eyes begged: Lemme go, Mitch.

Mitch was sick in the belly. He wouldn't pull the gag from the kid's mouth for anything. He'd turn soft if he heard the kid's voice. "Naw, Larry. You'll promise and go nuts again next week. You better get out before you kill some guy."

Again the bright eye and the bloodshot one begged mercy. They were wet and shining. Larry kicked about like a fish. Mitch's pals gulped. None of them were over thirty. Hanley thought of his wife and kids so he'd have no mercy. He used his family as a writ of execution. Mitch nodded. NO for the last time. He pulled out a blackjack and banged Larry hard on the temple. There was a bruise. Then they untied the ropes, breathing easier. They had done all that was merciful and now were



like cops unstrapping a corpse from the chair. They pulled the gag, wet with spit, from the kid's mouth and pushed the felt down tight over the bruise in a dull non-sporty angle. For the first time in years the felt didn't look hot on the kid. Mitch grabbed one arm. His pals helped him drag Larry out into the other room where a couple guys were waiting for the crap game to begin. They laughed at the drunk with the lid stuck on cock-eyed. Mike said he didn't like drunks that pass out cold. Hanley watched them go. They were taking care of their own. It was like a family with a corpse on its hands, solemn, quiet, sad. "O.K.," he said. "Wanna shoot some crap?"

In the corner of Mitch's car there was a milk can without the cover. They dropped the kid near it. Mitch drove west. They whizzed under the El. Forty-second, Fourteenth, were left behind. They parked near West Street. They were near the river, the car in an empty street. There were empty lots and the river like a presence, salty, eternal. They yanked the kid to a pier, one of them hauling the milk can. Their faces were hidden from one another.

It took a minute to jam the kid's head into the milk can. It was like a monstrous metal helmet. The unconscious kid looked like some kind of sea diver preparing to explore a new destiny. They pushed him off. One splash, the kid was gone. Out on the river a ferry gleamed red and green streaks on black water. Mitch said, "That's over with. The dumb lousy crazy kid."

One week, two weeks. Larry had disappeared. What the hell. The corner gang didn't give a damn. Babe figured Larry must've got his. Holding up crap games. In the spring sun they all looked alike, looking like any

other group of promising young men, hoping for the future, ambitious like law clerks, junior salesmen, rookies of any sort. Babe had an idea that that nutty punk of a Larry thought he'd hijack himself into being a big-shot. Lots of birds had that idea. But they were all glad he was gone for keeps. Nobody missed him. Even his mother forgot the son who had been as distant and unhuman as the sun. They were glad he wasn't around to queer them.

It hurt a guy to be seen in bad company.



## *MOVIE OF A BIG SHOT*

6-18-16—Concealed weapon;  
Suspended sentence.

That was Franky's first how-do-you-do from the cops but he was known before that. Brooksy was the first to get hep to Franky. Brooksy was a spotter, a kid about seventeen whose job was to keep an eye peeled on the kids two, three years younger than he was. If any of them looked good he'd go after them for the Badgers.

Down on the west side before prohibition it wasn't so easy getting good men. The famous old-time gangs were breaking up. There were still some rough-house and brass knuck free-for-alls but dough was scarce. When gangsters got caught cracking a store they sometimes got stuck in jail. Things weren't so hot. It wasn't so easy getting good guys.

One day Brooksy figured he could report on Franky. He had that kid sized up. Brooksy's pale freckled face with the eyes sunk behind large cheekbones, his voice sliding out of one corner of his mouth as if he were afraid somebody might be listening, made him seem a pretty cagey guy.

"Most a-those kids ain't so good," Brooksy said to Clip,

one of the Badger leaders. "Franky Murdoch's about the toughest."

"Likes to fight, huh?"

"All the time. No sense at all, Clip. Honest. No idea about hooking some dough. Just fighting." He stared at the ivory balls shooting down the next table, smiling, as if boasting: Me, I seen 'em come and go.

He gave Clip a pain. "Hey, you, spotter, you think you're damn wise. Well, you get after Franky. We want him."

Brooksy had a talk with Franky. Gee, Franky was the prize dope. He'd grabbed a little fruit over at Paddy's Market on Ninth Avenue but was that dough? He told Franky about the Badgers, and the big rough-houses they got in, watching the dope's eyes shine up. It was a pipe. And when he explained that a Badger had to know how to use his hooks for other things than socking a guy, Franky got hep.

And one day the two of them were ready to go swiping. "They got their bulls in them department stores," said Brooksy. "But we're going to hook their stuff and cop a sneak. You got the guts for it, Franky, I can see it with half an eye shut."

"I'd rather fight the bulls."

Brooksy laughed. This kid was a customer and a half. It was hard to catch on to him all at once. He'd known other fighting kids but this one— To look at him didn't tell you much. At fifteen, Franky was almost full-grown, a guy about five foot eight, middle build, but when you sized up Franky's head you were wise double over. It was a fighter's head, solid bone, big chin, short tough nose, all built close to the head. There was in that young face the promise of a real tough guy and Brooksy spotted it



right off the bat. As he used to say years later when Franky was running the Badgers: "It wasn't hard guessing. You look at the bulldog pup and you're dumber'n hell if you can't tell it's gonna be a big bull-dog. Right away I says to myself, 'Brooksy, you're tying up with that damn kid.'"

They worked the department stores until they almost got caught. One day Franky was passing a bottle of perfume between his legs to his partner. A bull spotted them. Brooksy noticed the heavy quick man easing up, the bull's mug pushing among the women busy with bargains. "Cheese it, Franky."

They heeled out fast, making for the stairs. Women shrieked, giggled, retreated. They ran a gauntlet through the stupor of the shoppers, Franky running ahead and socking out if any dumb skirt got in their way. Soon, behind them, cries of pain and fright, a woman fainting, a great roar of anger blew up like a storm. Franky packed more steam into his punches, letting them have it, grinning as his fist pounded into soft faces, pounding right-handers against their helpless bellies.

That was a rough-house Brooksy could never forget. The way he saw it, Franky was just a dummy, a wild fighting fool but it was worth it to work in with him, to have that killer on his side.

Franky made an A-1 Badger. He was handy with the brass knucks and lead pipe. A cop busting up a crap game hauled him in for carrying concealed weapons. The mob hired the right mouthpiece. Franky got off. When the U.S. went into the war in '17 Franky wanted to enlist against those Dutchmen butchering women and kids, but Brooksy made him hold his horses. Franky beat up a couple Dutchies and felt better. That winter the

pipes were busting and plumbers were doing a swell business fixing up the rotten tenement plumbing. Because Franky felt patriotic whenever they could they worked the Dutchies but if none were around an Irishman'd be elected. As Brooksy said: "A plumber was a plumber."

Late at night they'd hit the sidestreets off Ninth Avenue, looking up a house where a plumber was at work. It was dark, their breath freezing blue before them. It was so cold even the gas mains froze over, the city seeming helpless, waiting to be knocked off by anybody that happened along. They sneaked down a long dark hallway, opening the cellar door. Peering down the narrow flight of stairs, they saw the plumber bending over the light of a tallow candle. All in one flash they saw this, Franky hurrying down: "The lanlor' sent us." And even as the plumber was looking them over, hostile, suspicious, they were on him, shoving in a bitter group, their breaths frosty, Brooksy gripping the plumber's arms tight, a wicked grin on his face, his hand plastered over the plumber's mouth, Franky hauling out his lead pipe, smashing it down. Franky looked the plumber over. "He ain't Dutch but he's a Jew and they're both alike, the lousy bastards." He kicked out for luck. They grabbed the bag of tools, blew out the candle.

They sold the tools of a certain hock-shop run by fences, hitting a joint and blowing the dough in. It was small pickings for Brooksy but he could see with half an eye that Franky liked it and when Franky liked something he had to string along. Yeah, he liked it not so much for the dough but for the chance to bust up somebody. He was the kind of mug who only likes fighting. A prize dope but just the same Franky was getting to be top



cheese. Even Clip spoke careful to him. Franky'd fight anybody at the drop of a hat. Guys began to say he was one of the toughest mugs around.

In the spring the Badgers chucked a big beer party. Another crowd tried to bust it up. Around eleven o'clock everybody was slinging fists, maybe forty guys on a side. The brass knucks was shining everywhere, the taped-up lead pipes were swinging. The rented hall was jammed with fighting gangsters, the tables splintered, the fight pouring down the stairs like foaming beer into the street. Franky had a grand time. He'd been using his fists and anything that came to hand for about ten minutes, finally getting to feel he wasn't doing as much damage as he'd like. He smashed the bottom out of a beer bottle, gripping the neck tight, thrusting the sharp jagged glass into his fist like a cat darting its claws. Other guys began to follow Franky. The fight got bloody and when the cops broke it up there was plenty of gouged heads. One sucker lost an eye.

After this some Badgers got to be leery of Franky. He was just a plain dumb lousy fighting fool. When he got drunk he'd sail into his own pals. He carried a knife like any wop but just the same Brooksy stuck to him like a brother. When Franky got jammed in jail Brooksy sent him butts. When he got out Brooksy staked him to dough, fixed him up with a woman when he hadn't a jit's credit. Brooksy was his pal though nobody could guess why. Brooksy wasn't telling. Maybe Franky was one of the leaders. But that didn't mean so much. The Badgers had begun to blow up with the end of the war.

The gang ran into one of those streaks of tough luck that hit nations and businesses. Some of the Badgers were killed by cops. Others got long sentences. Some burned

in the chair. A few drifted out to Chicago. The Badgers had stunk up. But still Brooksy stuck to Franky like a manager to a future world champion heavy.

Brooksy had gotten longer and skinnier, his eyes cagey from seeing them come and go, a well-dressed smart guy with a roll always on him. He'd gotten in with a dope outfit. He was through with the old rough-house. He was on the way up. But it was still the same old Franky. He became Brooksy's strong arm although he didn't know it, figuring Brooksy as just a pal. He'd sell a tin of junk for Brooksy, or beat up a guy.

They sat at a table in a cafe. Brooksy grinned. "They're calling you one a-the toughest guys in the whole west side, and you are, by Jesus Christ. Keep it up. Every-time you smash a mug you get bigger."

"You said it." Although he was the younger by two years Franky seemed older, his fists on his knees, not an expression on his lean face with the white knife welt gleaming from cheekbone to chin. "But I ain't so dumb as you think, Brooksy. What's the good a-this fighting. Clip's up the river. The gang's monk'd up. Only a coupla us left. If it wasn't for you I'd be bust. Gee, Brooksy, we ain't so hot like we was in the old days."

"You're a big guy. You're one a-the toughest guys on the west side. That's plenty." He flicked off a fin from his roll.

Franky took the money. "Yeh, I'm tough'n broke. How about another fin? I'm broker'n hell."

"O.K." said Brooksy.

Prohibition. Gangs that'd been drifting into hooliganism, toughs who'd been drinking, fighting, scraping along on a coupla bucks a day, all got a new lease on life. Old gang enemies, Badgers, SM boys, Corkscrews, Triggers,



Dirty Monkeys, made up new mobs. The town was divided up, portions of it fought over week after week. Easy dough in tens of thousands rolled in. Politicians, cops, mobsters wallowed in money.

Brooksy kept up his dope connections but got more and more in gin, whiskey, beer, in the racket. There was too much dough for the old time settlements with blackjacks. Everybody began to pack rods. Guys like Franky who'd been hanging around poolrooms, knocking off a flat or store once in awhile, selling a tin now and then, living in four-buck-a-week furnished rooms, began to be worth something.

Franky worked for a mob run by Brooksy and a couple Italians. He was lucky to have Brooksy steer him right. The big-time stuff started by prohibition mixed him up. He was used to the small-time, maybe knocking off a century now and then, always on the ready for the bulls. Now, things were different. He didn't bother with the stuff Brooksy and the ginzos gabbed about. Territories. Distribution. And such God damn things. Let them worry. He had it easy and no cop worries. He sold cut rye to the speaks. It was a pipe. He'd roll up the joint in his car with a couple boys and see the joint's boss.

"Say, you," he'd holler. "I'm Franky. You heard a-me. This is Brooksy's territory." If the boss looked funny at him he'd slug him one in the gut. Mostly, for good luck he'd slug 'em anyway. Nothing like a sock in the puss to make them know what was what. He was a good salesman. His past record assured success. It was a pipe. He got great wads of dough for doing nothing at all. He had no idea Brooksy and his partners were making fortunes.

"Nothin' but the best," he said to the custom tailor, liking the snug feel of good clothes about his hard hips

and lean belly. He lived in hotels, got drunk, played crap and drifted in with real flashy dames, not the bums he'd been used to but dames what dressed elegant and had a line with them. He was like a starving beast suddenly strayed into rich fields.

The cry of Big Shot was hollered after him. He liked the noise of fame. Big Shot. Hot dog. That was something. When he was hauled down to police headquarters, thinking he was a Big Shot sort of squared things, made him snottier to the bulls.

And he was a Big Shot for doing nothing at all. When Brooksy passed the word such and such a guy was making too much of a stink, he'd tend to it personal. He smacked up ginks trying to chisel in on his women. He slashed a lug's arm once with his knife as warning. He shot down a mobster who'd been panning him, calling him a dummy, a dumb strong-arm, a guy run by Brooksy. But otherwise there wasn't much to do but have a good time. It was like riding the Loop-the-Loop down in Coney Island with all the days becoming Saturday nights.

After awhile, Brooksy had him protecting speaks that bought their booze. That was his angle of it.

He had the mob meet in a speak. Gee, he was the Big Shot sure enough. "It's this way. We're protectin' all the joints we're sellin' to. Anybody raising a stink you let me know." Their silence, alert, meaningful as the smell of gunpowder, made him feel good. He was boss. They began to talk about this guy and that guy what were sure to be tough.

A week later he walked into a speak off Tenth where the guy wouldn't shell out protection money. A couple boys watched out. He pushed the boss inside the narrow toilet. "You pay the cops, you lousy bastard, dontcha? We



ain't as good as the cops." The boss struggled. "Tough." He kned him in the crotch, slapping the mug's face with his jack. "Tough." The boss lay on the floor. Franky looked him over, kicking him in the face with a slow even pleasure.

Oh, he was up in the swim. Things broke his way. Protecting speaks led to protecting crap games. Franky'd drop in at the flats, the apartments, the hotel rooms, where the gamblers were taking the suckers. Fifty bucks was the tariff for a pretty good game. He'd march in, the gamblers sizing him up carefully as if he were a stranger although they saw him too damn often.

"Lo Franky. How's the big boy?"

Big boy. Big Shot. That was the stuff. He smiled, not giving them a hello, just waving his hand as if it were gold-plated. Up front a crap game was going on, all kinds of guys chucking the craps for easy dough.

What with speaks and crap games Franky was pretty busy and didn't have much time to see Brooksy who was also pretty busy. But Brooksy seemed satisfied. He gave Franky eight whole blocks around Columbus Circle as his extra special territory. Those eight blocks were claimed by another mob but Brooksy gave them to Franky anyway. It was worth it to Brooksy, to have Franky known as his mobster, to have the town know the toughest guy in the west side was a Brooksy guy.

Franky was tickled with his eight whole blocks. The word went out he was taking on boys. New guys came in. Franky assessed every speak, crap joint, brothel at so much per. The new guys came in handy collecting. The Innes mob said those eight blocks didn't belong to no lousy bastard Brooksy chisellers. That hunk of town belonged to Innes. To prove it Innes wiped out some of

Franky's new guys. Franky got sore at those lousy Innes chisellers.

He went to Brooksy with his troubles. The skinny freckled man yawned. "You getting soft, Franky? Clean the lice out. Ain't you the toughest guy around? If you step on a few big ones the little ones'll crawl away."

"Who are the big ones 'sides Innes?"

"Wurzburg. No harm to step on Hogan."

"Hogan, Wurzburg, Innes."

"I hear you got a new doll?"

Two of his best guys got Wurzburg who was sort of handy man to Innes. Wurzburg figured nobody would want him. He was pretty small stuff. They shot him as he was eating his supper in the kitchen, one kid strapped in a high chair, his old woman screaming. Franky fixed Hogan. He trailed him for two days. He was good trailing guys. His middle build and plain face with the features just cut out of bone wasn't specially noticeable. He might've been a third rate pug or a waiter or a truck-driver out of work. He knifed Hogan on a narrow step leading up to Hogan's speak. Then he rang the bell. Innes got leery when he heard, holing up. That was his finish. When a mobster holes up he's got to come out. A shotgun almost tore Innes' head off.

Now, a guy could step right up to Brooksy at a big shindig where there were a couple aldermen, a judge and all kinds of big guys in booze and the policy business, and say right out for everyone to hear: "Hey, Brooksy, I got that territory all shaped up." Franky was wearing a tux. A swell dame hung on his arm, the real stuff with red hair and a skin that made him gaga to look at. The place was jammed with all kinds of other dames loaded down



with ice, the floor slippery, the big-shots so thick around Brooksy you could see Brooksy was tops.

"Fine, Franky. Yes," he announced. "Franky's one tough baby."

Later that night Franky was alone with his beautiful skin. She was looking him over. "You're the toughest guy in the world, ain't you, Franky? But Brooksy is the guy."

"Huh?"

"Don't look so dumb. You do all the work for that wiseheimer."

"Aw, baby," he said, stroking her arms, "forget him."

She laughed with the careless contempt of a flash broad who figures it wasn't her business.

Franky rode around in a slick car. He was a Big Shot, bigger than an alderman, almost big as a judge but not so big as a mob leader.

But just the same the bulls grilled him about the killings of Wurzburg, Hogan, Innes, and other lugs he never heard of once. Franky looked flatly at the dumb clucks thinking they could get dope out of him. From him. They read off his file card. He'd been picked up for this and that. He'd been convicted twice for short stretches.

Franky said, "That's old stuff. Gee, that's old stuff."

"A lot ain't on here that should be on," the bull snapped. "You're in on plenty murders and you know it. We'll get you. What's left of the Badgers, huh? Murphy, Hecker, Toppy, the Pigeon, all up the river for twenty-three years. Clip, Lefty, Harry, Vincent shot. You're no better than them other Badgers, Franky. Nor Brooksy even."

"What you got me down this stinking hole for?"

It was a pain having bulls tell him he'd burn. He got drunk that night and went around spoiling for a fight. In

a free-for-all over a clip joint, he knifed a ginzo who called him a Harp, slamming down the fire-escape as the girls yelled blue murder.

Even before repeal, business began to monk up. It was getting organized regular. Guys like Brooksy didn't need guys like Franky so much as they used to. It was business first, last and always. In a system of chain stores and agreements, Franky began to be in the way. By this time most everybody was lined up, killed, out of the picture, or in it for keeps. Brooksy began to wear a look on his face that was the same as the look on a million business men. He didn't know what was going to happen. He voted straight Republican but the Democrats got in and then business went to hell, the country burned up with repeal. Brooksy began to ease out of the booze angle. He put more and more dough in policy numbers. He went into dope in a big way. Nothing like dope for steady conservative profits, or running a string of women, or a nice crap game.

"See, Franky," he said. "You gotta tone it down. The rough stuff's on the blink. Tone it down. Keep out of scraps. Yeah, it's funny me telling you. I built you up for scrapping. You were bred for it like an English bulldog but you got to change."

"Into a poodle?"

"Yeah, if you have to. We can't stand attention. They're rubbing out booze. We gotta keep out of their eyes."

"O.K."

But what was a guy going to do when a dirty cheap lug tells him his gin stinks? A sock in the puss. There were all sorts of guys like that. When Franky got pulled in Brooksy didn't get a kick out of being associated with the



toughest guy in the west side. Everytime Franky got a press he got one too and he didn't like it.

Like any other business man Brooksy began to cut out his shaky assets. He cut Franky's dough down. The times were bad. He cut him down again. In a month Franky was scratching his chin and wondering at the new mugs doing his work. Brooksy gave him assistants in his eight blocks, quieting him down by giving him a crap joint of his own.

Every night Franky was at his joint. They had a good game going on a pool table with a guy called Trubia as the banker. It was a good game and Franky did his own bouncing. He never guessed Brooksy was souring up on him. They were still pals. It was the times. You had to lay low after repeal. The booze was up pig-creek alley. He figured he was real lucky having a nice crap joint all his own with only Brooksy as partner.

The word began to circulate Franky was on the skids.

He couldn't step out with the flash broads he was used to. Didn't have the cash. The three four hundred he pulled down a week, he blew in fast on dames, booze and ponies. Brooksy didn't run into him much. Brooksy had his own headaches trying to fit his crowd in with repeal. A tough mug like Franky was needed not all all. It was time for smooth talk.

Franky got in his eye. He bounced out guys too rough, Trubia used to tell the boss. Franky didn't know how to handle a sore loser. Franky's idea was to bat him in the eye. Customers dropped off. There were plenty other joints.

Then Franky got rough with two college kids. The kids had drag. There were cops. Brooksy had to shut the joint up. A nice joint it was, too. He started another joint and

Franky had less to do. First, there was a bouncer picked by Brooksy. Franky was to help the bouncer out only if the bouncer asked for help. He didn't ask. It hurt Franky to see another guy having all the fun, bums-rushing the pikers out, sloughing a drink. Trubia ran the works. Franky got less and less dough. When he bellyached Brooksy said it was a time for laying low and they all had to get along best they could. It was lousy. No dough. Not even any fun. Franky felt punk. He was drunk all the time and always in fights.

Although he was practically nobody now, just another has-been, whenever he got yanked in for disorderly conduct, the papers would write him up as if he were still Big Shot Franky, the buddy and partner of Brooksy.

That dope was plain trouble, thought Brooksy. One night as Franky was hoofing it up a dark staircase, two guys who'd been following him trailed along.

"Franky," one of them called. "Brooksy wants a-see you."

Franky stared down at the two dark hulks at the foot of the stairs. "See me? C'mon up if you wanna see me." He was soused and if those punks would've said boo he'd hop right down into them, the lousy punks. They came up and as he was mumbling, "What about Brooksy?" the knife was in his vitals. He gasped twice and toppled down the stairs, his corpse moving slower than the killers.

The record clerk at headquarters wrote the last entry.

11-31-34—Found dead. Stabbed in heart. Detective Jackell, Homicide Squad assigned.



## FRIDAY WE CRACK THE BANK

"Aw RIGHT, aw right, you clam-mouth!" said Hardwell. "I got you up here before the boys show up. It's this li'l Yid kid. He's going to fit in, I tell you. And all you do is push that frozen mug of yours in my face." His big fists might have been a truck-driver's, but no truck-driver had such fancy nails, or palms so white and soft.

"No green kid like him fits in with cracking a bank."

"Aw right, but I say he does."

"How?"

"The bunch of us push up to this hick town. You, Mac, Fat, Slim—stay out of the burg till Friday. Me, I'm in the burg, and so I got my face bandaged up. But one guy, I want every hick in Windemac to remember his mug. That's where the kid fits in. The kid's the bait which we give them."

"All wrong." Longovanni seemed to be sitting in a silence that came from his own short body in its blue suit; and his pale round face, with the lips clamped together and the moist impersonal eyes, was the core of silence.

"Why all wrong?"

"The kid ain't sixteen."

Hardwell raised his big smiling head, snapping his fingers in triumph as if Longovanni at last was catching

on. "That's talking, Longy. Sure. He ain't got no record. He's ain't been in stir. He ain't even a what-you-may-call them, one of them dee-lin-quents."

"He'd rat if the bulls nabbed him."

"When they nab him, he'll be dead."

Longovanni moved one hand as if it worked on a wire. He wasn't showing he didn't catch all this stuff. "Why?" he said. "I got a head for detail. You ain't."

"What dope you got?" He stirred. "On this kid what's goin' to be dead?"

Hardwell admired the ginzo's A-1 poker mug. "It's a kid what's hanging out in pool parlors, and Slim got to know him. The kid wants to get in a racket. You know them dumb kinds of kids. They want to make dough fast. Be a big-shot. When I tell Slim I need a kid just like this kid for this bank job, Friday, he tells me. See?"

"No. Why's the kid such hot bait?"

"Aw right, Longy. We knock off the bank. We got the dough. They get bulls up from New York. The bulls figure it's a reg'lar mob, which it is. I don't want them to figure it's a reg'lar mob. That's where the kid fits in. The kid's bait for the bulls. You ask me how? This is how: We kill the kid, stick a rod in his mitt, some of the bank's dough in the other. Bait, Longy. Just plain bait. The bulls find the kid. It looks like the guys he was in with got to fighting it out. Reg'lar mobs don't fight it out. Every jit's divvied up before the job's pulled. Kid mobs fight. Kid mobs don't get the detail and divvyng parts pat. Then, the bulls see this kid got no record. The bulls think him and the guys what cracked the bank is all kids. That lets us out. The bulls got a theory. The papers shout it up: 'Young bank robber murdered by youthful criminals over bank hold-up.'"



"You're a careful guy," said Longovanni. "The kid's trouble."

"No trouble. It don't cost us nothing. There's always a mob of kids around to be the fall guy. This li'l Yid kid's right for us, and lemme tell you I can use that hick dough."

"I owe plenty rent."

They were sitting in a two-room furnished apartment in the West Side. Cigarette-holes had been burned in the sofa and easy chairs by former tenants. The bed was unmade. Hardwell's packed bags were in one corner. It was an atmosphere of swift comings and goings, and there was nothing about the two men that was at variance with the atmosphere. The bluff smiling front of Hardwell, Longovanni's dead non-emotion, both seemed abnormal, properties rather than human qualities, things similar to the unmade bed, the packed bags, the cigarette-holes in the furniture.

When there was a knock on the door, Hardwell nodded at the quart of gin on the table. "Watch that kid smile when I say: 'Have a drink, Kid!—Come on in, boys,'" he hollered.

They all walked in as if they had nothing better to do, saying hello, sitting on the bed, filling the chairs. The kid and Slim remained standing.

"This is the kid what I told you about," said Slim. "Kid, this is Hardwell. And Longovanni."

The kid was almost seventeen. He had a big head and heavy-lidded eyes, and there was a red mark across his nose that he'd got from wearing glasses. He never wore glasses when he hung out at the pool parlor. He wasn't wearing them now. He didn't look like the type of kid who'd be drawn by criminals. He looked more like a li-

brary bug. He had a short thick nose, sensitive mouth. His bones hadn't hardened yet. "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Hardwell, and you too, Mr. Longovanni." He stepped forward and offered his uncertain hand to each of the mob leaders.

None of the six men who'd just come in gave any of this a tumble. In due time Hardwell'd pass the word out on the kid. They could wait.

Slim picked up the gin bottle. "Have a drink, kid."

"Thanks." He eased over toward the gin, ill at ease, but getting more and more nerve. He'd noticed that the strangers weren't staring at him. They took him for granted. Hardwell was smiling. The kid's face flushed with a hysterical happiness. Gee, at last he was in with a real mob, real guys, the kind you read about, or saw hanging out on corners. This was the life of Riley, the real stuff. Crime—danger—adventure. Not working like a dog for Papa, delivering pressed suits to the customers after school. School—the tailor-shop—the library! Hell with all that! He drank from the bottle, smothered a sensation of choking, his startled eyes moving at the men. But no one laughed.

Hardwell faced his mob. "The kid's in with us on the new job. Slim says he's got the stuff."

"You can see that with one eye peeled," said Longovanni.

The two mob leaders smiled at each other for sewing the kid up. It was a regular act. The kid flushed. "What'd I tell you, Longy?" said Hardwell. "With the kid, it's a cinch. Don't you think, kid, we're taking you in because we like your face. It's because we need you. Tonight the bunch of us heel up to this hick town. Friday we crack the bank."



The kid choked. He wanted to speak but didn't like to butt in on the big-shots. Hardwell noticed the kid's lips opening and shutting. "Go on—spring it, kid," he said.

"I'll have to go home. I mean I didn't know we were going tonight, and so I'll have to go home and say good-by, that is. You see—"

"You say good-by to them, and it's good-by to this outfit." Hardwell smiled, his blue eyes friendly as if he were a sort of big brother. "Things ain't done that way, kid. Lots of us got wives and an old man and such, but we don't go home and say no good-bys when a big job's all set to go."

"That's God's truth," said Longovanni.

The mobsters smoked, crossed their legs, drank gin. Their aspects were stereotyped. They didn't appear to have wives or any human kin to whom it was necessary to say good-by.

"O.K., Mr. Hardwell," said the kid. "I won't, then, I want to be treated like any of the rest, even if I'm younger a little, and just beginning, sort of, without much experience." He sat next to Slim on the couch. He was fond of Slim. Slim had got him his break.

"Me and Longy, here, thought the job out," said Hardwell. "See what you think of it, kid. The hick bank's out in the sticks, more'n a hundred miles out. Me and Longy looked it over last week."

The mob listened intently now. They all needed the dough waiting in the bank.

Longovanni sized the kid up. It was a dumb kid—green, fresh. A pink kid what'd done nothing. And its eyes were popping. It was having a helluva time. This was a helluva kick. It was funny. Longovanni's eyes met

those of Hardwell and for a second they both got a grand kick out of that dumb kid.

"He catches on," thought Hardwell. "Give the ginzo time, and he catches on." Boy, it was a hot joke making the kid feel he was big! "The big card is that the bank never heard of bank-robberies. In the East, bank-robberies don't happen. That's the big card. It's in a section where no reg'lar mobs work." His brain was two jumps ahead. He saw the kid dead, the bulls picking up the dead kid and figuring that regular mobs didn't fight or crack banks in the East, figuring it a bunch of crazy kids. "There's some slot-machine guys up there, but that's all. It's a bank in what they call the trout country, and all kinds of saps come from all over to catch them trout fishes. Rich saps in big hotels. Them hotels bank plenty of cash in this bank. There's a pack of business in town. Two department stores. Lots of other dough coming in from the summer people. Rich farmers. That bank's got too much dough for a hick bank, and there ain't been a bank cracked up there in a million years. Me and the kid'll show them a few new tricks."

The kid squirmed with excitement. Hardwell was a damn' nice guy, not like he'd imagined, not tough and sour, but nice-looking and easy-going. Longovanni was more like the kind of racketeer you read about, with his dark looks and funny smiles. The kid didn't believe in his luck, but here he was sitting in with a regular mob, one of them, planning a bank-robbery, his dreams come true—boy, oh boy, planning a bank-robbery! With Hardwell. With Longovanni! With Slim, who had an arm about the kid's shoulders. Slim was twenty-eight, with a big pimpled chin he'd doused with lots of shaving powder, and what a flashy guy he was at the pooltable!



With the Polack, a lunky guy near the gin, with a thick butcher's hand with a shiny ring on it! With Skinny Tony, sitting on the window-seat, stylish dressed, always showing his broken teeth! With Mac, lying on the bed and blowing smoke-rings.

With Fat, who rested his face on both fists, and there was nothing noticeable about him but his jutting lip, which made him look comical, and the fact that he was much older than the rest, around forty. With Sammy! This guy had a monkey head and deep brown eyes. Like all the others, he was well-dressed.

The six men were always glancing from Longovanni to Hardwell with a swift intense non-recognition, as if they'd never been intimate with their leaders, and were only spectators now. The kid's heart pounded too fast. He was so green. He wished he was half the man of any of them.

Hardwell scratched his head. "That's the big card—the bank not expecting callers. The next big card is snappy work when the time for it to be snappy comes.—The cars all set?" he asked the fat man.

"All set." He didn't move his head from his hands. "Runnin' good. Spare plates for the lot." He'd been a mechanic. The three cars were stolen.

"Swell. The job shapes up like this, kid. Me and you register at one of them hotels where the saps come for them trout fishes. I make out you're the kid brother and I'm sick. My head's all taped up with bandages, like I been in a crash."

"You and the kid got the real work," said Longovanni.

"You bet, Longy."

"Ask him why he got to bandage up his puss, kid," said Longovanni.

"So no one'll remember the Hardwell mug. They got my picture, but you ain't got no record, no picture, so it's aw right for you kid."

"That suits me." The kid lit another butt.

Hardwell and Longovanni looked at one another like two cardsharp partners, congratulating each other after a successful play.

"I knew you had the making," said Hardwell. "Me and the kid make a deposit at the bank, and since I'm sick, the kid makes the deposit under some phony name."

"The rest's our job," said Longovanni.

"Yeah." Hardwell smiled. "The bank shuts at three. We'll be up there tomorrow, Tuesday. On Friday, ten minutes of three, me and the kid go to the bank to draw some of our money. The kid's at the teller's window. Don't worry about that part, pal. We'll go over it extra while we're riding up. But these mugs got to know all the detail. I play square with those that treat me square."

"The only way," said Longovanni. "Ain't it, kid?"

"You bet, Mr. Longovanni."

"Aw right. The kid's at the teller's window. I go to the front door. My head hurts or something. That's the tip-off."

"Yep," said Longovanni seriously. "I see you at the bank door. Me, Slim, Mac, Fat. We've just pulled into town. Fat at the wheel. We don't park a minute. Get it, Fat."

"No hick gets the chance to look the car, or the guys in the car, over."

"That's talking, Fat," said Hardwell. "Hicks are nosey guys. Around half-past two you're in the country, outside of town. At half-past two you pull in real slow to the bank. Most likely it's hot as hell. No one's around. If I



come out of the bank, you keep going. Something is n.g., if I come out. If I stay in, you brake the boat—"

"I don't like the part about them inspector signs." Longovanni pulled up his pressed trousers, his eyes still moist and distant, but fine lines gathering around them. He thought Hardwell was too damn' smart. O.K. about the kid. That wasn't a bad idea to blow smoke at the bulls even if the bulls wouldn't bite. But this damn' stuff about inspector signs—

"This is what Longy means, kid. You and me are taking out our money. Fat's at the ready at the wheel. Longy, Mac, Slim, come in, their gats at the ready. Longy hands me the inspector sign when he passes me in the door. I hang it on the door quick."

Ironically Longovanni also appealed to the kid. "The sign says 'Government Inspection' on it. It'll bring the hicks like flies. Let's hang up a sign what says 'Bank Closed' on it. Which do you like, kid?"

"Aw right, what do you think, kid?" said Hardwell. "We need the extra time the sign gives us." It was hot stuff. First he and Longy'd been working together, kidding the li'l punk, and now something'd popped up that they couldn't see with one eye, they were still speaking up to the kid. Damn Longy! Longy was one set ginzo. Longy figured he'd show the guys he had a head on him too.

The kid sided with Hardwell. He liked Hardwell much better. "It's a dandy idea. The hicks'll think we're Government inspectors."

"Naw," said Longovanni. "The sign should be 'Bank Closed.'" His black eyes rested on the kid and there was no malicious humor in them.

"Aw right, aw right, but wait a minute. It's this way, kid: Longy's forgetting we watched the bank two days,

and they never put a sign out with 'Bank Closed' on it, not once. A sign like that'd tip some hick off it wasn't kosher, wouldn't it, kid? The sign says 'Bank Closed,' and yet the hick sees a mob inside."

"We don't need no sign at all, then," said Longovanni.

"We need a sign. Time's what we need. A hick sees the mob inside and thinks nothing of it. And on the car Fat's driving, Longy, I'd put a sign on the windshield saying 'Government Inspection' on it."

"You're too smart. We don't need no signs."

"How about it, kid?" said Hardwell, his eyes on the mob.

"You're right, Mr. Hardwell." No one listened.

The fat man pulled in his lip. "No harm in the signs, Longy. It makes it smoother. It takes care of the chance of a hick seeing new guys in the bank—guys what ain't supposed to be there. The signs explain things. Hicks like things to be explained."

"And anyway," said Hardwell, "the idea is snappy work, ain't it? Chances are, we'll be in and out before any hick spots us or spots the signs. Snappy working's the big card. The signs is a detail."

Without seeming to move his eyes, Longovanni saw that the guys thought like Hardwell—that Fat thought like Hardwell. Hardwell was too smart. He didn't like smart guys so smart. Look at the way Hardwell was fixing the kid's wagon. Just to have his damned detail straight. "O.K. about the signs. I was just wondering a li'l."

"Aw right, Longy. . . . Longy hands me the sign. I put it up. Longy, Mac, Slim, cover the hick bankers. There's five of them. Mac takes the teller in the cage. Longy covers the banker behind the rail, the clerk guy, the two dame stenos. Slim gags and handcuffs the five o' them. I



pick up all the loose dough. When the teller's fixed, Mac helps Slim."

"We take them too, but it ain't likely, with the bank ready to close," said Hardwell.

"Whyn't we knock off the bank Sat'day," said Longovanni. "More dough put in up to one o'clock closing. All the hotels depositing to get the dough off their hands."

Longy had too many ideas, Hardwell thought. "Saturday's n.g. It closes at one. That's too early. The hick town's full of hicks Saturday."

"I just wanted to know."

"You know. Aw right, we work fast. We finish up. Longy, Slim, Mac beat it out. Me and the kid shoot off in our boat. Chances are no one'll get hep till we're the hell out. How you like it, kid?"

The kid's eyes were shining like when he read of some daring exploit. "Swell, swell!"

"We pull out in two cars, kid." Longovanni smiled as the kid's eyes shot from Hardwell to himself. "Then a hick happens along somehow. The word's flashed we've cracked the bank. Some hick, say, tells about this car with 'Government Inspection' on it. They locate the hotel you stop at with the kid where they know your car. O.K. I got all this. I also know the third car's waiting with the Polack, Skinny, Sammy. I also know we ditch the two hot cars, and then us four and you two, which is six, jams in with them three. Nine of us in one car. They wire the word along. The State cops are out for us. We ain't no mob of tourists."

There wouldn't be nine; when they ditched the two cars, Hardwell'd ditch the kid, shoot the punk with its eyes popping out and having a helluva time.

"When you speak, Longy, it's to the point. You want to

say nine in one car is chancy." He also thought of the kid left with the hot cars. "But the State cops got no description worth a jit. You, Fat, Slim, Mac, bust in with hats over your eyes. The hick bankers are gagged, handcuffed, blindfolded, in a minute. And so damn' scared they got no descriptions worth much."

"I got a big belly," said Fat.

"So's a million other guys."

"What's the kid think about it?" Longovanni hoped the guys would catch on that Hardwell was too smart. "Hardwell plays safe with his mug bandaged up. But you, kid, they got you cold."

"I'm the first to admit it," snapped Hardwell. He was getting griped, playing with the kid. "They see the kid at the bank, at the hotel, but he ain't kicking like you guys." The kid grinned. Hardwell figured that'd fix the wop. Longy had too many kicks lately. Maybe he needed another guy instead of Longy. Maybe Fat. Only Fat had too many ideas.

"Even the kid's not taking a chance," he went on. "What's the description worth, without a record or fingerprints? What's it worth? Everybody's five foot six or seven, and weighs medium, or is fat or skinny, or got brown or blue eyes and such. If you ain't a freak, it ain't worth one damn."

"The one chance we take is being stopped on the road. So what? Where we been? Skinny, the Polack, Sammy prove they been at a place. What place? Over Stavens Pond, where I got a pal in slot machines. The pal swears all of us been there and didn't move an inch. We're waiters and guys stopping over at his roadhouse. But how likely is that? I mention it to show you I don't take a chance, even when it ain't likely. I got the detail dead



set. But just to argue. Say I got no pal at Stavens Pond. Ain't there a load of roads to beat it out? The job's a cinch. Stavens Pond is thirty miles from the bank. We get there and hole in before anybody alive knows there's a bank cracked. Me and Longy go into town. You other guys drift in by bus and train." He laughed harshly. "Hot stuff. No damned nobody'll get hep to Stavens Pond. We're safe. The bank's good as cracked. With the detail I got, we ain't risking a finger."

Longovanni said: "I didn't mean a thing, boss."

"Aw right. The party's over. Grab them satchels, kid. We got a long ride into the country."

"The cars are ready," Fat said gloomily.

The gin bottle was empty. Skinny and the Polack had burned cigarette-holes in the rug. Ashes were scattered on the rug. The filed out as if they'd never been there a second. Hardwell patted the kid on the back. "You stick with me, kid, and I'll show you all the tricks what ain't kosher."

EXCERPT from Windemac Recorder: "The first bank-robbery in this section in forty years ended abruptly for the leader of the young bank-robbers, who was found shot to death off the Walling Road in one of two stolen cars the bank-robbers had abandoned.

"One of the cars was identified by the Windemac Hotel as the car in which the young man who registered as Irving Grost had driven up on Tuesday night with an unknown companion who played the part of a sick man.

"The second car was the one seen by Mrs. Frank Elbia of 9 Arrow Street on her way to Peabody's General Grocery Store the day of the bank-robbery. She remembered a long black car pulled up at the bank about three o'clock, just as young Grost was inside with his

confederate. She recalled the car carries a sign on the windshield, 'Government Bank Inspection.' She said she looked toward the bank but that everything appeared as usual. She remarked to Mr. Peabody that it was probably some of the new government policies.

"No one knew the bank had been robbed until Jesse Glosson, the bank's teller, managed to kick off the ropes binding his feet and reach the door facing Main Street. Gagged, blindfolded, handcuffed, he stood against the glass until Paul Stower of 58 Crown Street noticed him. It was remarkable that Mr. Glosson managed to free his feet and then locate the door, bound and helpless as he was.

"The alarm was given out about five o'clock, two hours after the robbery. The state police soon discovered the two abandoned cars with the murdered ringleader in one of them, a pistol in one hand that he hadn't a chance to fire, a few of the bank's notes in the other. Evidently he'd been doublecrossed and murdered by his own confederates, probably during the division of the spoils. He probably demanded too much as the leader.

"The details of this crime, the amazing youth of young Grost (this name, of course, is undoubtedly an alias), indicated, the police claim, the work of a group of unidentified New York schoolboys without experience in bank hold-ups, who'd embarked on this crime with a reckless carelessness that had somehow resulted in success. With imaginations fired by popular entertainment, they had stolen two cars—and probably several other cars as well—and ventured into the country. Young Grost's career as a crime captain and big-shot was remarkably short. (Other details on page four.)"



## GUY WITH THE BUSTED JAW

NOW IT HAPPENED that this guy who was a friend of mine got his jaw bust over in a gin-mill on Ninth Avenue just for doing nothing at all. Aw right, I says, you got your jaw bust for doing nothing at all and the idea is to find out the mug who done it.

It was hard to get what he was saying because they'd wired the jaw up over at St. Vincent. Having a jaw cracked was n.g. twice over. He'd dropped his beer belly because it showed he was working regular and eating heavy. The beer belly coming off he'd lost twenty pounds with sipping up slops three times a day through a straw.

You're gonna find me the mug who broke my jaw. It was like this. I was drinking beer.

Only beer, I says, if I'm gonna find the mug come clean.

The beer was chasers, he says, the gins come before the chasers and I was feeling good and the next thing I knows I was pushing the sawdust off the floor and the jaw was cracked and they drag me over the hospital and nobody'll tell me who done the busting.

How many guys was drinking when you were having them beer chasers, I says.

Maybe ten, maybe twenny. Maybe in-betwixt. But I was feeling good and none of them ten or twenny knows me and I know none of them. I got no guys after me. I ain't knifed nobody be they pal or skirt and nobody's knifed me until they bust the jaw. I think I'm a right guy till they bust the jaw. The way I figure it the mug who done it is one of them lousy———who go around gin-mills picking fights and cracking jaws of innocent bystanders so they can get the rep of being hard guys and such a lousy———fixed my wagon because he saw I was feeling good and I was an innocent bystander.

O.K., I says, I'll find that crum-bum if it's the last thing I do.

First I went over the particular gin-mill and I ordered a beer from the barkeep and I says, I hope nobody comes in and busts my jaw and it's too bad a joint gets the rep for being a place where guys can get their jaws bust.

He wiped the bar and looks at me both yes and no then he says, It was one of them things.

There oughta be a law against them things, I joke.

Yeh, says the barkeep, but his look is more no than yes, and I can see he's a clam-mouth.

I hear some lousy ginzo pulled the trick, I says. That's a shame for this guy with the bust jaw I hear is a donkey like you and me.

Whoever told you the guy what bust the jaw is a ginzo or a boggy or a rice-eater or whatever he is one prime liar and I don't know you and you oughta mind your own business.

O.K., I says, if you get sore over nothing at all. I was only thinking it's O.K. to get your jaw cracked if you're on the loose and get into a fight for then it's coming to



you, but to have a jaw cracked for doing nothing at all is plain stinky, and you needn't get sore because I'm only telling what I heard on the corner.

The barkeep smiles at me with the phony mug barkeeps got on tap when they're covering up and don't want to lose a customer. O.K., he says, forget it. It was one of them things and it won't happen twict.

That night I tell my friend I found out nothing and the barkeep is one Grade A louse. My friend has got the crying towel out about eating so much slops and losing his beer belly.

The barkeep won't talk, he says, because I tried plenty and like I told you I don't know the guys who were in the saloon the night they bust the jaw so we can't find out a thing from the bums who were the bonafide eyewitnesses. The only thing to do is for you to hang around the gin-mills drinking a beer and making believe you've got a load on and keeping your ears primed and ready for the work that must come along, it always does, or maybe the guy what bust the jaw'll drift in and look around for another jaw to bust.

I hung around in a different gin-mill every night but only in the same neighborhood, four blocks up from the gin-mill where it happened and four blocks down because guys stick to one neighborhood and if mugs want reps as tough mugs it can't be all over the map. I'd buy a coupla beers and take a week drinking them and I'd look groggy and listen to the free loaders and barflies bulling, and the barkeeps shaking the dice with the regulars. But in all the big talks no work come in and no mugs happened around to bust jaws. I was getting sour and dumpy only I was sorry for my pals drinking slops and such, and it was also like I was a dinny like

my cousin, only in this case it wasn't hooking some lug of finding phony paper or anything in the regular line of a dinny but only trying to snatch the mug who wanted to be tough so busted my pal's jaw.

One night after three beers that lasted me a week in a gin-mill two blocks away from the joint where it happened, two young guys came in loaded to the gills and right away one of them let out a big stink about there being no free feed. But they order up two beers anyway and begin to bab so loud that all the guys at the bar had to listen and it was the punkest talk a guy ever listened to because one of the two new guys done all the talking like he was on a soap-box.

He was a big mug with a face like a baby's behind and he says, It's a crying shame that there ain't a good free lunch like in the old days. Then there was liver-wurst and salami and lots of other stuff and the beer was only a jit.

The barkeep says, I can't help it feller.

And then an old barfly pipes up. You ain't more'n twenny-one, sonny, and how in hell do you remember the good old days for then you was in diapers most likely.

The big mug says, Yeah, you old bum what do you know about it?

The old bum takes a poke at this mug. The mug's pal grabs his arm and hollers, C'mon Mac. Let'm alone. Guys along the bar begin to curse or laugh depending how they were loaded and with what, and I ease over for I could've sworn on ten Bibles that this mug was the mug that bust my friend's jaw for he was one of them kind who go about picking fights in gin-mills because they got nothing else to do and no jobs and want



a rep as tough mugs like I seen it that minute with the yellow mug picking on a barfly who was loaded and not knowing what was on. Everybody bunches front and lets our a holler, the barkeep yelling his head off to can the noise. Some guys was holding back the barfly and the mug's pal was trying to hold back his lousy pal who was blue from cursing and slinging fists, yelling, I'm taking no guff from nobody and from no old bum.

O.K., I says stepping up to him, how about taking guff from me? I'm your size you dirty yellow belly. Ain't you the mug what cracked the jaw of a guy a month ago?

Who wants to know, he shouts, getting loose from everybody all howling and scrambling out of the way. His haymaker sails over and I let him have it right in his puss and then I socked his pal for good luck. The mug drops, his pal flopped against the wall and I heeled out of the joint feeling good for doing the right thing.

The next day I tell my friend all about it. It's a pipe now, I says, I know what the mug looks like and we can get some of the boys to mob him good and proper. I wanted to bust his jaw but the fist landed too high.

My friend shakes his head. I heard it all, he says looking at me funny. You bust the nose of a kid that never was in no trouble at all before.

I say slow and easy because this friend of mine is a little dumb, This kid was shouting and making passes at an old barfly and when I tells him is he the guy what bust your jaw, he hollers who wants to know and makes a pass at me what would've bust my jaw if he'd landed only I beat him to it knowing the kind of rat he is.

He shakes his head. That kid was never in no trouble and they say the mug what bust his nose, a mug medium

built with big shoulders and grey cat eyes, meaning you, and pasted this kid and slugged his pal and beat up three innocent bystanders, and they're saying this mug what did all this damage was one of them mugs trying to get a rep as a tough mug and they're also saying this mug probably the same mug what busted my jaw a month ago.

I looked at him quiet like. That's what you deserve when you don't mind your own business and I would've bust his jaw this time myself if he wasn't a pal. But all I says is, You're a little dumb.

He says slow like he wasn't sure, Holy Moses, Tom, you ain't the mug what bust my jaw when I was having them beer chasers?

Then I break out. O.K., pal, stick the knife in me but don't turn it.

I shake my fist. I couldn't help it. A guy's only human ain't he?



## *BROTHERS IN HELL'S KITCHEN*

THE OLD LADY was rocking herself in the kitchen with the stubborn fortitude of a kid on a rocking-horse, not even turning when he opened the door. That was funny, he thought. It was always a holiday when he came home from work, her smiling face so glad for the hunger in him, you'd think it was her going to pack away the big meal.

"Hullo, mom," he said. "What's up?"

He saw that she'd been crying. She had a little face and age sat hugging her in the flat like a third person. Beneath her loose black dress, her body was too meager bonfire that used all fuels. He sucked in his breath, dropping his fists. "What's he done this time, mom?"

"He ain't done nothin, Tim."

"Don't kid me."

Her face was piteous as if demanding what he wanted of her, or why young hard bodies still drew sustenance and heart from the old when the old had no more to give. She lifted her hands in the yellow light, letting them drop to her lap, also dropping all responsibility for the strong lean man and what he might do.

"He took the money," she said, "and you should be remembering he is the elder brother. Poor Michael. And all he's been through—"

"How much?"

"Six dollars it was and he said he borrowed it only until his government check came in——"

He patted her shoulder. "Loan, huh? We can't afford loans to that punk."

Her brown eyes shone at him with the frightened devotion of a dog. He grinned, feeling his muscles unbend, smelling the food in the pots on the gas range. Starting deep in his belly, the rage burned up in him like a shot of booze, licking up higher and higher until his heart was hot.

He slammed the door, beating it down the tenement flights. On each landing, the cooking suppers, beef, cabbage, liver, fish, hit his empty stomach.

It was cold in the street and as he hurtled forward he thought SIX DOLLARS. I got to have it. He cut east from Tenth Avenue to Ninth. The El pillars held the rails high in the night. Something wintry and scheming built itself in his brain. SIX DOLLARS. Mike'd spent it by now. But the old lady didn't have to know. The shop windows glared their light at him and he was seeing his brother, his big brother, the sponging heel, as he lammed into a stationery store. The fat little man behind the counter contemplated him a second.

"You laid off at the garage, Tim?"

"Naw, I'm working, Herman. Can't talk now. I ain't had my supper. I got to have six bucks. Pay you back Sat'day when I get my dough. Snap it."

The proprietor took out his wallet, his fingers taking out a five and a one. The door opened, the bell above it clanging the second time. A kid dawled in to buy a penny candy.

He hurried out, his hand waving so-long at Herman's



pudgy face. The kid was bawling his order like a millionaire: "Gimme some a-them and them and them—"

He glanced at his hand, at the two bills it held, stuffing them in his pocket. Where'd Mike be? Minnie's? Too early. The pool-room. That was hot. Big brother. Some big brother. Hooking the old lady's dough. The damn—

He almost stumbled along the streets, the sidewalks alternately solid then turning into black wool before him, the thick cold pressing against his temples and empty belly. There was no one about, those coming home from work walking like him, their heads low on their breasts against the rage of winter.

He pushed open the pool-room door, the chill he brought with him seduced by the warm tobacco smell of the joint. Four tables were directly before him, each a lessening rectangle as they receded towards the rear. The rolling of polished ivory on green cloth hit his eyes first, with a roving impersonal regard of their own. The hangers-on paused a second, the swift casual onslaught of their eyes lifting from him. "How's Tim!" said one, and then another said something, his voice surprised, and and then strangely, the hangers-on began to stare at him, the players muttering what's the matter, raising their attention from play, leaning on their sticks. They marveled at his blanched face, following the passage of his eyes through the smoke, and many turned to see.

Mike dropped his cue at the third table, his hat in the pool-room and then he, too, was still. Now, it seemed the two brothers were alone with the primordial beating in their veins, with the hate going back to Cain and Abel, their hearts pumping the same blood, their bodies leaning forward as if they must embrace or fight.

"Lo, Tim," said Mike.

"I want to see you private. You know what."

In the bitter silence they alone were muscled with meaning. The crowd glanced from the younger brother near the door, his face reddened, his flesh lean from hard work, to Mike, plumper, with a jowl, a face yellow from late sleeping and boozing. Looking at Mike with the brilliant clairvoyance of crowds guessing the base of things, many remembered Mike'd been gassed in the war and hadn't been much account to anybody since. And of this, too, the brothers seemed aware, apart from one another like duelists and between them the years and the fates that had caused them to pace off like enemies.

"I'll see you," said Mike. He moved past the green tables, three separate times the bright center lights throwing his full nervous face into eye shadow and jutting nose and chin. They made way for him.

The brothers walked out of the pool-room. When the door shut, the bunch let go with short smiles and curses, crowding forward to the curtained window. Then it was that the fellows Mike'd been shooting pool with remembered he'd gone out into the winter in a vest. They peddled this fact one to the other, their hearts sailing within them at prospect of a fight.

"I want the old lady's dough," said Tim. "You damn fool coming out without a coat."

"I ain't got it. About a buck left. They been taking me. When I get my check—"

"You grafter. Whyn't you look for work?"

"Mind your damn business."

They leaned close to one another as if sheltering from the wind. "Keep your mitts off my dough in the future. I'm not taking any more a-your guff." For the first time



in his life, there was enough hate in him to break the tabu of the older brother, but not enough to strike the hard blow. Still feeling his way, he pushed Mike, growling. "Gwan, rummy, get back where it's warm"; his arm before him, ready to jab again, his breath freezing in the still air.

Mike knocked his arm down, his face invincible so that they both went back to kid days when the big brother had been big, before the war. Mike's left banged against his forehead. Their arms thrashed, the brothers lunged, striking down all that had been. They were two men rioting on an empty street.

The pool-room bunch had clustered about the open door, holding their ground as yet, not surrounding the fighters for this was different. The guys were brothers and it wasn't time to egg them on until they'd forgotten.

Tim's fist looped up against his brother's shoulder, no heart in him to aim at the full face bearing down, the jowls shaking. Mike parried the blow, swung a fist into his brother's belly. His breath shot out swiftly with a prolonged sensation of choking. Tim danced back, his eyes slitting, watching the two arms in their shirt-sleeves hitting out at him. His left hand beat out a dangerous punctual time of its own, yet still he held back his fury, ducking Mike's fists, whispering hotly: "You dumb lunk. Cut it."

Mike didn't answer, blood-lusty to land a finisher, then snarling. "Teach you. To butt in—"

Tim retreated, hemmed in the circle. The pool-room bunch had formed their theatre, their shouts banging loud and savage. It seemed as if he'd been deaf and suddenly were hearing again, suddenly hopeless, inexorably pitted against his brother. It was too late. Mike

rushed him, his chin buried in neck, his right fist held ready to smash in his head. What had been their affair was now the business of the crowd.

"Mike. Cut it. Christ." And all the time, his body was fighting the battle his heart wanted none of, feinting, slashing, his fists plunking against his brother's arms and chest.

They hollered for Mike to knock the snorter out, to teach the squirt a lesson.

There was an end to ducking. He was no boxer. Mike's fist again caught him on the temple, pain smashing in to his brain. Now, the fear in his brain howled to him to protect himself, to take care. He slunk down like a vicious cat under Mike's haymakers, bending lower, catapulting his fists into the face above him, that was not his brother's face but the enemy's, weaving back before Mike's frenzied attack, craftily watching it spend itself on his arms or on empty air, leaping forward again, both fists shooting into the opposing body with a downward incessant surge as terrible as the motor pistons among which he worked. Perpetually, they stood there in a minute when neither backed away, but were immortal with stone fists. The crowd forgot the winter. One of the fighters slumped, and they remembered, stamping their numb feet, shrinking into their overcoats. The fight was over.

"Hey," yelled Tim. "Get me his stuff. I'm taking him home."

He lifted up his brother's head and wiped the bloody lips with his handkerchief. This was his big brother and he had cut his face. When they were kids, fooling around, they'd never struck at one another's faces, but it had been done now. He took the bottle one of the



boys offered, pouring a little whiskey down Mike's throat, almost shrieking at the realization that Mike hadn't been unconscious, not one second. He guessed this immediately. Compressed with pain, Mike's eyelids widened, the pupils staring out at him with a forlorn sinister amusement. He helped him into his coat, hauling Mike to his feet.

"Jesus, Mike," he said. "I'm sorry."

"All right, said Mike. "You licked me."

The brothers walked down the side-street towards Tenth Avenue. The pity in Tim's heart again surged up into his throat, squeezing his tongue flat. Christ, something rotten as hell the way Mike'd knuckled down. Mike wasn't the guy he'd been. This licking was nothing. Something worse. Mike couldn't be the same inside for him to give in so easy. Poor Mike. He'd done something awful that night. He'd finished Mike up for keeps. The war had wiped Mike up and now he knew what a wiping it was. He whispered briefly. "Don't tell the old lady. This is what I want you to do . . ."

Mike nodded at what he had to say. They climbed the flights, entering the flat, pale, breathing hard. The old lady was sitting in her rocker but when she saw them she got up and went to the pots. "Get your supper, Tim." It appeared as if that was all she'd been waiting for, and that her life was just get him food.

Mike handed her the five dollar bill and the single Tim'd given him before coming up. "I don't need it, mom."

She glanced at the liars, dumping out the brown beef on a plate. She put the money in a cup on the shelf, staring at her sons.

"Coming home, mom, a couple guys got fresh and me

and Mike had to chase them off." Tim fidgeted, more embarrassed than his mother and brother. They took it easy, the lie, the fake and all. He felt rotten. Christ, it was no good knowing why they took it easier. Knowing why didn't help much. The old lady was old; things made no difference to her. And the same for Mike. He had as much go to him as an old man. He'd been gassed in the war. He was through. No guts in him for work or anything. Both of them were all wiped up.

He sat down at the table. "Bring on the food," he said. "I'm hungrier than hell." As he chewed on the beef and potatoes, he thought ME, I'm younger, I got something ahead of me.

What, he thought, another war?"



## ASK ANYBODY

BITTSY YAWNED awake. His choir boy's face seemed even more delicate as he rubbed his lips soft. As he stooped over to put on his shoes, his blond hair fell in a flinting mass over his forehead. One more morning and afternoon spent hunting for a job. One more beauty nap before eating supper. He stared at his bedroom. It wasn't much bigger than a largesized closet, a space between two windowless walls in the middle of his family's railroad flat.

He walked into the kitchen to wash. His two kid brothers and kid sister were already sitting at the table, waiting to be fed, noisy as puppies in a kennel.

Bittsy washed his hands and stumbled against a pile of schoolbooks on the linoleum. "Can't you find no better place?" The books were strapped with a canvas belt. "My ole belt," he exclaimed. "You can still see where I put my initials on in ink."

"If they were only good like you was in school, Bittsy," his mother said.

"They'll be better." Bittsy watched his mother mash up the potatoes. Potatoes again. Potatoes and spaghetti and oatmeal and potato soup and 12-cents-a-pound chopped meat that other people bought for their dogs. Potatoes

for tonight's supper and stale bread and two-day-old cake. It was tough for his old lady. If he could find a job. Poor mama, he thought. Scrubbing floors every night and feeding all of them. If he could only find a job and chip something in.

"I'm not hungry," he mumbled.

"Sit down," his mother said. "You must be hungry tramping the streets all day." She had given birth to Bittsy when she had been his age, 20. She was only 40 but her face was as tragic as a doll's tossed into the gutter.

"I'm a pretty good mechanic if I say so myself. What's the good of it? What's the good of anything? There ain't a thing. I've been lookin' for weeks."

"Bing, bing, bing!" the younger of his kid brothers shouted. "Bing, bing, bing! I'm gonna shoot you with my machine-gun 'cause I'm a G-man."

"You ought to pay more attention to your report card," Bittsy said.

For an instant his mother's eyes softened as if she remembered the days when her husband had been alive and making good pay and smiling at Bittsy's report cards. but he was dead and buried, complete for \$100, and Bittsy was the man in the house. He was a good boy. Ask anybody in the neighborhood. He tried his best. She divided the potatoes and they all sat down and ate.

Bittsy finished first. "I'm goin' for a walk, ma. Wake me up early tomorrow."

She didn't ask him where he was going. She knew. She shook her head slowly as if she must register some protest.

"Don't you worry so much about me," he said. "I'm



not doin' anything bad. It's better than just sittin' home. This way I can talk a coupla hours."

"That gang's no good," she said anxiously.

"Okay, we got the price for a movie! I'll take in a show and buy myself a steak dinner. A feller has to do something, ma. Good night. And you kids. Don't pester her. She's tired."

A guy felt better out on the street. Living home put a guy in the dumps. He peered into the German bakeries, the coffee pots, the hardware stores on Eighth Avenue. He was young and it was spring. He could go for some strawberry shortcake all right if he had the price.

The gang was hanging out on the corner like they did every night, smoking cigarette, wisecracking, figuring out the girls passing by. There were seven or eight of them in front of the ice cream parlor. They seemed to belong to the glaring yellow light as if the corner were their true home.

"Looka Bittsy," Mitch greeted. "That mama's boy. She let you come down?"

Mitch's side-kick, Turk, looked up from his brightly polished shoes. "Ya find a job yet?"

Their voices shot at Bittsy from all sides.

"He'll find a job in Canarsie."

"Not even in Canarsie."

"Bittsy the champ job-finder."

Mitch sneered. His brown eyes danced from guy to guy. "I gotta job for you, Bitts. It's a swell job 'cause I like you."

"I'm not bitin'," Bittsy said.

"Bite this," Mitch cried. "But no foolin'. I gotta job for you."

"Yeah?" Bittsy said warily. "Take it yourself then if it's so hot."

"It's drivin' me around in my Rolls-Royce."

The gang roared. Mitch's jokes were no prizes but Mitch had a way of telling them. Mitch had a way of making the other guy look like a dope.

"Lay off Bittsy!" Turk stooged. "Bittsy's a good guy." He sliced his throat with his forefinger. "That for you Bittsy."

"You stickin' up for the midget?" Mitch asked Turk.

"Bittsy's no midget," Turk said.

Mitch looped his arm around Bittsy's shoulders. "I wanna tell you something private. C'mon."

"What about?" Bittsy demanded. They weren't getting his goat. He could take the razzing better than most.

Bittsy followed Mitch and Turk up the street. The back of his neck twitched. What did they want with him?

"You can drive a car like a light," Mitch said.

Turk nodded his heavy swarthy head. "You bet he can."

"What if I can" Bittsy said.

"We got one we want you to drive."

"Where'd you get a car?"

"We found it in the gutter," Turk said.

The spring night raced through Bittsy like a fever. His cheek bones flushed.

"You wanna drive it? Mitch asked.

"Where?"

Turk's thick lips bunched. "Where? Anywhere."

"Hold on, Turk," Mitch said. "I'll do the talkin'. We could get plenty of guys to drive that car but you're a swell driver an' we can trust you. Lots of those guys



you can't trust," he whispered confidentially. "I got it all planned. You drive the car an' we'll split three ways. How about it, Bitts?"

"A hold-up!" Bittsy cried.

"Sh! Keep it down," Mitch said. "The whole block don't hafta know."

"Not for me. Not for me." He turned on his heel to go but Mitch grabbed his wrist and said:

"Where's the fire, Bitts? It's a cinch, an' we split three ways." He offered his pack of cigarettes. "Take one. You're so broke you can't buy your own pack."

"So what, if I can't?" He lit the cigarette and puffed deeply.

"Can't you use a li'l dough?" Mitch asked. "You look half-starved mosta the time. You gotta right to a li'l dough."

"Yeah," Turk growled.

"I'll find a job," Bittsy said.

"Where? In China?" Mitch said. "Come in with us."

"No."

"Oh, come in an' don't be a sap. Don't you wanna eat a square meal?" Mitch looked up suddenly at an approaching pedestrian.

Potatoes and oatmeal, Bittsy thought. A chance to chip in some money home! Do it oncel "If I come along I don't want to do nothin' else. No guns for me."

"Tone it down till this guy passes," Mitch warned. A few minutes later he said, "We use our heads. We don't use no guns. You just drive the car. That's all. . . ."

The stolen car, Bittsy at the wheel, slowed down to less than 15 miles an hour. One by one, the El pillars marched into Bittsy's sight like giant policemen. He shuddered. This was a hold-up and he was in on it.

"Turn down to the right," Mitch ordered. "An' up Tenth Avenue."

Bittsy drove west. The lights of the stores rippled before him in an exciting flow. Hold-up! Hold-up! Millions of stars danced across his eyes. A loudspeaker thundered an old song . . . "You're the cream in my coffee" . . .

"Stop here!" Mitch said.

Bittsy stared as the two kids stepped out of the car. All his thoughts exploded into streaks of neon light. He shouldn't have come along. He should've stayed home. There was still time to beat it. He shouldn't have come.

He got out of the car but nobody in the side street looked at him. He strolled to the flight of stairs down which Mitch and Turk had gone. Downstairs, guys played pool. Downstairs, there was a hold-up. Now! Now! Now there was a hold-up! His eyes moved up the street. Surely, somebody must be eyeing him! Somebody must be tipped off!

Sitting back at the wheel again, his eyes glued to the flight of stairs, he wondered who lived in this neighborhood? They must be awful dumb not to know that there was a hold-up going on. Now! Now!

He must have been crazy. How could he have been so crazy? His heart drummed in his chest. The ignition board of the car wavered in his sight. There were the gears. First gear, second gear, third gear. Release the hand brake. Step on the gas! The seat burned under him. His hands sweated. Step on the gas!

A revolver shot!

Bittsy shoved the gears into first.

Mitch and Turk dashed up the stairs and into the



car. Turk slammed the door. Bittsy shoved the gears into second. The car wheeled around the corner in high, around the next corner, the next corner, under the Ninth Avenue El. Bittsy thought that, anyway, the El pillars were wise to what he was up to.

Mitch wiped his cheeks and forehead as if the sweat were a clue he must remove. He grabbed Bittsy's collar. "Not so fast! Get down one of them streets!"

"A gun!" Bittsy gasped. "You had a gun!"

"A cop car!" Turk hollered. "Look, Mitch! Bittsy!" Even as he spoke, the heart-piercing wail of the siren reached out for them like a hand.

"Don't slow up!" Mitch said. "You punk! First too fast so they spotted us. Now too slow."

"Faster!" Turk yelled.

"Of alla luck!" Mitch whined. He tossed his gun out of the car.

Bittsy stepped on the gas. The buildings cluffed both sides of the street. He was driving on streets that suddenly seemed to open before him, cracks in the solid black stone the night had become. His small hands gripped the wheel with the delicate precision of a good mechanic's.

The street lamps appeared strung one next to the other like huge cheap beads, whizzing at him. The reddish sky piled on top of the roofs. The sky fell into the street. From the opposite end of the street, a second police car was approaching him, its headlights two burning eyes, its headlights the reddish sky. The shrieks of the police sirens seemed to be issuing from his own opened lips.

Bittsy braked the car. Cops came at them, revolvers in their fists. Bittsy clambered out to the gutter. He

sighed. He felt as if he had always stood in this unknown slum street, crowds of people clustering around him, his hands above his head. . . .

The reporter assigned to the story tried to ease out of the flat where Bittsy had lived. The three sobbing kids depressed him. But the mother leaned against the door.

"My boy is a good boy," she said as she had been saying for days. "My boy is a good boy. He never done no wrong. He looked for work every day. He tried his best, mister. I don't know what got into him that night. But he did it for us. For us. He was like a father to the kids. He hated to see me work so hard but he couldn't find a job. Those two other boys made him come but he didn't kill nobody. They killed that man in the pool parlor. My boy is a good boy. It isn't right he should be killed in the chair. My boy is a good boy. Ask anybody in the neighborhood.



## *MURDER OF THE FRANKFURTER MAN*

READING the newspaper how Paddy Quayne died in the chair, my life hooked up again with things and times forgotten. I used to know Paddy Quayne. A big kid even then with a flat white face and the huge raw wrists of a meat chopper. Dead, now. I shoved the paper down on my desk and made the sign of the cross, and the finger that described the four holy points was blunt and a little twisted, not used to such devotions. I'd forgotten many things: religion was one of them, and Paddy another, so that thinking about him was a sort of confessional. Long ago, Paddy and I had lived down on the west side.

I said to myself: you big fat slob with a wife and kids, you're a murderer as much as Paddy, and it isn't all heredity and environment either, don't palm it off on any tripe like that. It was luck, the luck of the wind just stopping dead when another puff'd cut the leaf off. Paddy'd been blown out to hell while I had married and gotten wealth and family. The murder of the frankfurter man'd been my last but Paddy's first.

Now, my kid days in the west side were alive in me. It was as if I'd climbed half way up a ladder, my face fixed on more climbing, and suddenly I'd looked down at

the rungs I'd passed—there were my kid days before me, the earth from which I'd begun, I saw the people that made up this earliest earth of mine. They came from my heart and brain: girls, Anne, Mary, school teachers, old Mrs. Keenan with her faint respectable mustache, the hot-cross buns in the Dutch bakeries on Ninth Avenue.

It was hard to sit still. The blood of my kid days was hot in me, and again I felt that terrible wish to rise up, to rise tall as God, to front something unseen, something in my blood, to close my fist on the ache and the joy of the streets I'd run in, to grip the city and my youth, and hold fast. I sat up and said to myself: what the hell's wrong with you, you fat slob with your hair thinning out and such things done with forever.

I went to the outer office and told the secretary I wasn't in that day. I had a big deal to think over. I shut myself in, reread the notice about Paddy's murder. It didn't say whether he'd turned the priest down, but I'd bet anything he hadn't . . . So he'd gone on to other crimes. Christ, I was lucky . . .

First, was the big peppermint building. How big it was. They used to make peppermint candies on the top two floors. When the men were feeling good, they'd come out on the fire-escapes facing our backyard and chuck handfuls to us kids. Those we didn't catch we picked up in hard little fragments like bits of meteors that hardly ever hit and stayed intact. We were always hungry. We swiped stuff from the stationery stores where they kept their candy under glass in neat trays full of chocolate pins, merrywells, lafayettes, tootsie rolls. Sneaking from behind the El pillars down on Ninth, any guy could fetch bananas or apples out of Paddy's market. When we got bigger and were getting ready to



graduate from public school, we started to raid the Greek frankfurter men.

Hunger got us in dutch even though we were the better families down in Hell's Kitchen. My father owned the tenement my family lived in. He was a contractor and vowed all of us were going to Fordham. Paddy's old man was a cop; his two brothers became cops. There was Angelo whose old man ran a fancy wop grocery full of expensive bologna in silver wrappings like they used for cigars; Smitty, Bigthumb, others.

Paddy started our club in a shed in our backyard. My shed was chosen so that the club members could be near the peppermints hailing down like manna from the sky. We put in benches, and had a lock inside and out. It'd be dark as soot. We'd sit there and smoke and talk, but mostly it would be Paddy spiling about what he could do, Paddy whiter than any girl, the rest of us squatting down, listening. What did we say? He made a ship of wood and painted it coal black with some stolen shoe-polish. This pirate ship bore the club name 1-4-ALL. We made stinkbombs of rolledup movie film which we'd light and throw into the doors of the Greek coffee houses. The Greeks were the meat for our pogroms.

Paddy was sore at the frankfurter man. The greaser was a bum sport. He was a dark, sad-looking man, blowing on his cold hands as he waited for customers. The skinny long franks, sauerkraut, mustard, sold for 2c each. "We want old franks," Paddy hollered, "Hey, Greekie, you got old franks, no good to you?" The frankfurter man shook his head. He sold the best quality: "Come on boys, nice frankfooters, two pennies, plenty sourkrout." He smiled at the five of us bunched

up hard against him. Me and Angelo dug out some pennies and bought franks. We piled on the sauerkraut until he grabbed for the fork, Paddy yelling, "The hell with the greaser, pile it on, gwan, you're paying good dough for it." Angelo glanced at me, let go of the fork. He was a good kid, a fat strong boy who used to go to the library with me. We walked off, the crowd wolfing at us. "Gimme a hunk." "Don't be cheap." Paddy, bellowing the loudest, and chiseling the most.

That winter the gutters were piled high with snow hills, across the tops of which the smaller kids tramped paths. No stranger was safe in the west side. After school, we'd hang around our snow forts and let fly at anybody whose looks we didn't like. Paddy made the Greek an offer. For two cents every day, we were to get five old franks. No use bulling. The Greek had old franks. The Greek complained to a cop, and we watched the bluecoat laughing at him, heard him saying: "Kids down here gotta make jokes. They chuck snowballs, Chris? It won't hurt you." The cop rolled down frosty Ninth, swinging his club. The Greek turned pale at sight of us. It seemed there was no protection for him. "It's a tough country, the U.S.A.," Paddy hollered, "Tough for greaseballs."

He moved his wagon from corner to corner, but we hunted him down with our snowballs. Bang. They were always walloping his hand-wagon. We got to be good aimers. Once, Paddy smacked him plunk in the eye. He had a blinker, but still he didn't take up our offer on old franks, shaking his fist. "I'm a poor man," he cried; "let me alone boys."

Angelo and I got sick of the fun, but Paddy was set:



"You got old franks, and a frank a day for a guy ain't much."

The Greek cried. I'd never seen a big man, even a greaseball, cry in the open street. It was a bright winter day, the windows laced with frost, a day where all our faces were red, our eyes clear, the El cut sharp out of the sky, everything clean-looking as ice. And there was the Greek bawling, his breath freezing.

Paddy called a meeting about that bum sport. First, he led us on a sweet mickey raid. A shawled old Jewish woman carried her own wood in a little tin wagon to bake her sweet potatoes. She gave us one each, and we let her alone. "See, said Paddy, "that sheeny's not a bad sport." We ate the mickeys in our club, the sweet smell, the clean dense brown taste in our mouths. Angelo said Paddy was too tough on the Greek. Whyn't he let the poor guy alone? Paddy blew on his hot mickey. Angelo was a dope. The guy was only a greaseball, and betcha he's got a thousand bucks saved. All them bum sports had. All we wanted was a free frank a day. Gee, that showed you how cheap the greaseball was.

After school the next day, Paddy soaked our snowballs in water. When they froze he put them in paper bags he'd weeded out of the grocer. It was fun hunting somebody; we spread out, each fellow covering a few blocks. The Brooks and Bigthumb found the Greek. We joined forces, charged down on him, hollering, yelling like Indians in the movies circling a covered wagon, letting fly with all our might. Bang. He got hit hard and plenty, staggering against his wagon like a murdered man. Paddy yelled for us to hook the franks. We rushed in, grabbing the hot dogs and handfuls of sauerkraut, dumping them into our mouths. On the cold lonely

corner nobody interfered, the storekeepers observing inside their doors with no guts to butt in because if they did we might come round and smash their windows. Seeing us eating up his stock, the frankfurter man came to life. We couldn't believe it. Greeks were yellow, you could do anything you wanted to them; and now this bum we'd been shellacking reached out and gripped Paddy. He was bleeding at the mouth from some of the snowballs, but he didn't let go of Paddy's collar, hollering for the cops. Paddy walloped him in the gut, shouting for us to fix the lousy—We piled in then. The Greek got wild and was pounded some more. We kicked him in the groin, mad as hell, Paddy the worst because his collar was ripped and he'd get sloughed from his old man. We charged the frankfurter man off his feet, booting him in the head and body. We had to pull Paddy away. The Greek was out. Paddy upset the wagon and we ran away. Ducking around the corner I looked back. The storekeepers had come out at last, a woman was screaming.

If ever a fellow needed a secret bunk and locked door, it was that time. We huddled in the club, sweating from the hard run. Paddy said, "That'll teach greaseball a lesson." We said nothing to him because it was all done and over with, but when the meeting broke up, I took Angelo up to my house, in my room, kicking out my kid brother who slept in the same bed with me. Angelo began to cry. It was awful what we'd done. Angelo said he'd never see Paddy again and he was through with the club for keeps. Then he went home, and I wondered how I was going to tell Paddy the club was washed up and there'd be no more meetings.

That Greek never pushed a wagon again. He was



killed. That was that. Lucky, we'd forced the Greek out of our neighborhood where the storekeepers knew us, or we'd a-been in dutch. It was all forgotten. A Greek on the west side in those years was nothing. It was winter, people forget easier in winter.

I had no trouble with Paddy. He and Bigthumb marched into the yard the next day. They'd been over to the market and offered me some apples they'd swiped. I wouldn't take them. Paddy stared at the shiny apples in his hand. "No more club," I said. "I'm out. Angelo's out, no more using my shed." Paddy clenched his fists and said for two bits he'd give me two socks, a pair of socks wrapped around my beak. Bigthumb was edging in on me. Another second and I'd have been sunk, but suddenly I remembered it was my backyard, my shed, the house was my old man's. I said I'd knock his ears into his big mouth. Bigthumb waited for Paddy to flatten me. Paddy edged away. "I'll see you when you ain't so hot," he said, walking out of the yard. I hollered after him, "Me, I'm no Greek, don't forget it."

If I hadn't kicked Paddy out, I might've ended the way he did. Luck was with me, because Bigthumb was neutral, because the shed was mine, because Paddy was yellow or didn't give a damn. Luck.

After that, Paddy went with a bunch up near Eighth Avenue, mostly wops. Then he was hanging out in a strange block altogether. Angelo and I locked the club up for keeps. We were graduating in a few months and thinking of high school. We were pals because we liked each other and were murderers. Angelo confessed, but I didn't. And it was all over . . .

I put down my cigar and read of Paddy going to the

chair. I thought God rest you Paddy. He was so fair, so fine in complexion, slim, always on the go. And suddenly I was desperate, my throat dry, the juice of remembering leaving me, my heart bitter. I was sorry, not for the frankfurter man, but for something elusive and forgotten that I had held in fist and heart. It was gone. I laughed and thought: you poor fat slob, you're glad you helped kill that Greek. It makes you remember. It makes you feel good. It makes you recapture youth. That was the wonder. To hold youth when time had locked it out of heart for keeps. My confessional was almost over. I was sad, sighing, vaguely purged, but without wonder. I said to myself: it isn't environment. You bet it isn't. It's the will to murder in most of us, forgotten, covered over, faked up, and luck had been with me to steer me clear of the chair. I rang for the secretary and said I'd be in for other callers.

"Other callers?" she asked.

"Only the callers of this day and age," I said. Later she'd probably tell the officeboy the boss was getting woozy.

THE END

(Please turn page)



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