

THE BACK ALLEY WEBZINE

Volume 1, Number 3

April, 2008

This is an archived copy of the third issue of **The Back Alley Webzine**. It contains the complete text of the Table of Contents, The Editor's Note, and each of the stories featured in that issue. It will be maintained on **The Back Alley Webzine** site for the enjoyment and entertainment of our readers. Please feel free to download this archived issue for reading on your home computer, laptop, PDAs, electronic books, or whatever other whizbang device those crazy scientists come up with in the future.

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Editor's Note

THIS TOWN IS BIG ENOUGH FOR ALL OF US!

I had planned this month to write something pithy about the decline of the hardboiled market and the seriously discouraging trend toward 'hobby cozies' and 'books with hooks'. Now, I know this site has a decided bias toward the rougher side of crime, but honestly! Do you really want to read about cat-sitting knitters solving murders?

Raymond Chandler probably put it best when he said that it was important to take murder out of the drawing room and put it back on the streets, where it belongs.

Like I said, I had planned to write about this, but every time I put fingers to keyboard my head would lock up like Marion Penitentiary on a Saturday night, and nothing would flow. So I junked the idea. If you're reading this site, you already know most of my gripes anyway.

Besides, there is good news on the horizon.

Among the best of the news is the revival, by *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine's* Janet Hutchings, of *Black Mask* - or at least a vague semblance of it. Every other issue, Hutchings plans to include a classic hardboiled and a new hardboiled story, using the *Black Mask* header. That means that, six times a year (more or less) those of us who like a little blood in our violence have a shot at cracking the hardest market in mystery short fiction. It ain't much, but it's more than we had last year. I dig it the most.

Also, I am extremely pleased and proud to announce that - in its very first year of existence - The Back Alley has garnered TWO DERRINGER AWARD NOMINATIONS!

The Derringers are awarded each year by the Short Mystery Fiction Society, an Internet gathering of almost a thousand mystery short story authors and aficionados. Awards are given in four categories, based on story length. Finalists were announced on Tuesday, April 1, 2008, and I can tell you that was a great day in The Back Alley.

John Weagly received a nomination in the 1001-4000 Word Category for his story *In The Shadows Of Wrigley Field*, which appeared in our November issue. John is a Chicago-based author who is also a playwright, and produces theatrical works. He's also had at least one other Derringer nomination that I could determine, so he's really on a roll!

In the 8001-17500 Word Category, *Paper Walls/Glass Houses* received a nomination. This story was written by some guy named Eric Shane, and appeared in our first issue, in June 2007. I am very familiar with this Shane fellow, as he has been sleeping with my wife for most of the last quarter century. I shower with him every morning, and sometimes I even brush his teeth.

Okay, you got me. Eric Shane is the pseudonym I created for myself when it became obvious that I had no future selling my books to New York publishers under my original name. But that's another story.

Just to make it fair, I also submitted a story written under my own name, and wouldn't you know it? It got nominated too! *The Gospel According to Gordon Black*, an Eamon Gold short published in *Thrilling Detective's* fall issue, is a finalist in the 4001-8000 Word Category for the Derringers.

I would strongly urge you, if you are a member of SMFS, to wander over to their site at yahoogroups.com and vote for these stories, so we can pull off a strong finish when the awards are announced on May 15th.

The important thing is that a brand new hardboiled/noir webzine surged to the front of the pack this year and stole away with ONE EIGHTH of all the nominations in the Derringer Awards. I can't tell you how proud I am of this endeavor, and of all the authors who have graced its pages in its first three issues, including that wacky group of funsters listed below.

My point is this - our commitment at *The Back Alley* is to bring you the finest new hardboiled and noir literature and commentary, with absolutely no frills, in the online marketplace. My good buddy Kevin Burton Smith just celebrated the tenth anniversary of the birth of The Thrilling Detective Website, and I can't wait for the day that we crack open a bottle of bubbly to do the same for this quarterly madhouse of murder and mayhem.

So, if you're returning for another hit at the ol' Back Alley bong, welcome back! If it's your first time in the joint, then allow me to welcome you to the show. The more the merrier!

Richard Helms, Editor - *The Back Alley*

LINEUP FOR VOLUME I, NUMBER 3



TIM WOHLFORTH'S story "*Jesus Christ Is Dead!*" made the "Distinguished Mystery Stories" list in Otto Penzler's *2005 Best American Mystery Stories*. A story of his was chosen for inclusion in the Mystery Writers of America's *Death Do Us Part*, edited by Harlan Coben published in August 2006 by Little Brown. Dennis McMillan has published a Crip and Henrietta story as part of his *Plots With Guns* anthology. He is a Pushcart Prize Nominee and has received a Certificate of Excellence from the Dana Literary Society. Wohlforth has had seventy-four short stories accepted for publication in print magazines, ezines, and in twelve anthologies. He co-authored the non-fiction book, *On The Edge: Political Cults Right and Left*, published by M.E. Sharpe.



According to his website, Derringer Award Nominee **JUSTIN GUSTAINIS** attended college at the University of Scranton, a Jesuit university that figures prominently in several of his writings. Following military service, he held a variety of jobs, including speechwriter and professional bodyguard, before earning a Ph.D. at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Mr. Gustainis currently lives in Plattsburgh, New York, where he is a Professor of Communication at Plattsburgh State University. His academic publications include the book *American Rhetoric and the Vietnam War*, published in 1993. His two novels in print are *The Hades Project*, and *Black Magic Woman*.



According to her blog, **CLAIR DICKSON** is a bitter cynical Alternative High School Teacher (do they hire anyone other?) with a dark sense of humor, a weakness for word play, and a love of Crime Noir and Hardboiled detectives. Writing is her bread, and teaching is her butter... or maybe teaching is her bread and writing is her butter... or maybe... no,.. well, let's just say that writing and teaching are her various breads and butters (I would apologize to Woody Allen, but he never did so to me, so there we are). The best part of her job is that she gets to teach fun courses like Movies vs. Books and read Raymond Chandler! Her Bo Fexler stories have appeared in *Muzzle Flash*, *Sons of Spade*, *Yellow Mama*, *Mysterical-E*, and *New Mystery Reader*.



According to Amazon.com, **JOCHEM VAN DER STEEN** has been writing all his life. With the Internet he found a chance to share his work with the rest of the world. His main influences include the old guys like Hammett and Chandler as well as wit slingers like Harlan Coben and Robert B. Parker. He's also a big fan of alternative rock and comic books, which explains a lot of the pop culture references in his work. The proprietor of the *Sons of Spade* website, Jochem somehow manages to capture the essence of the American PI ethos, despite the fact that he lives far away in the Netherlands. His Noah Milano novel *The White Knight Syndrome*, was published in 2003.



GAY TOLTL KINMAN is a three-time Agatha Award Nominee (strange to see one of *those* in *The Back Alley!*), an Eppie Award Winner and a Derringer Award Nominee. She has published short stories in *HandHeld Crime*, *Shots*, *Detective Mystery Stories*, *Futures*, *Crime and Suspense*, and *Mysterical-E*. She co-edited a cookbook, and a book promotion publication for Sisters in Crime, and was on the Board of SINC / LA. She coordinated workshops for writers at California State University, San Bernardino; and is a scholar for the Library of Congress / UCLA "Women of Mystery" discussion groups. Kinman has a library degree and a law degree. Judging by her picture, she's also a Fifth Degree Jedi, but that's another genre...



FRANK NORRIS holds a very special place in the history of noir fiction. Despite his relative lack of renown today, around the turn of the twentieth century he was setting the world on fire with his naturalistic, dark stories of doomed people. Many of the novels he produced during his tragically brief life were later made into movies, such as *Moran of the Lady Letty*, and the immensely classic silent film *Greed* (1924, Erich von Stroheim), which was based on his massive novel *McTeague*.

Continuing in this issue, we present Part II of *McTeague*, and attempt in each issue to include some history or critical analysis of the incredible literary work of Frank Norris.



BRUCE STIRLING'S poetry and prose appear in number of literary journals including *Out Of The Gutter*, and *Thieves Jargon*. His crime story "Woman Want" was co-winner of the 2007 Fish-Knife Award for Short Crime Fiction. He's also published fiction in *Debris*, *Eclectica*, *Pen Pricks*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Opium*, and *Sensorotica*.

Bruce is a little camera-shy, so we've substituted a picture of a gun-toting monkey. That'll teach him a thing or two about deadlines!

ALVIN'S CHOICE
A Crip and Henrietta Short Mystery
by
Tim Wohlforth

TIM WOHLFORTH'S story "Jesus Christ Is Dead!" made the "Distinguished Mystery Stories" list in Otto Penzler's 2005 Best American Mystery Stories. A story of his was chosen for inclusion in the Mystery Writers of America's Death Do Us Part, edited by Harlan Coben published in August 2006 by Little Brown. Dennis McMillan has published a Crip and Henrietta story as part of his Plots With Guns anthology. He is a Pushcart Prize Nominee and has received a Certificate of Excellence from the Dana Literary Society. Wohlforth has had seventy-four short stories accepted for publication in print magazines, ezines, and in twelve anthologies

I was wheeling up the street towards the Cal campus in my chair when I spotted her. Hard to miss Henrietta with her spiked green hair, rings in eyebrows, nose, cult tattoos on her skinny bare arms, another ring in her exposed naval, torn jeans. Come to think of it she might just have blended in on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, though nowhere else, if it wasn't for that scowl. It was as if she was ready to strike in the face anyone who dared to smile at her. A curled cobra with green hair and hostile green eyes.

Before she spotted me I quickly spun my wheels around almost colliding with a clown on a unicycle. Then I took off down the street, heading back to my home off Dwight. I heard puffing and wheezing. The damn woman was bearing down on me. If only the sidewalk had been less crowded with students heading for classes I knew I could've outrun her. There are few thin ladies in this world less fit than Henrietta. Even some 300 pounders are in better shape.

I took pity on her and, facing the inevitable, slowed down. She bashed into my chair and broke out into spasms of coughing.

"Trying to kill me, Crip?" she said. "Is that what you're trying to do? You're a motherfucker, a useless cripple, a no good motherfucking freak."

Even for Henrietta that outburst was a bit much. Cripple fine. That's the truth. Motherfucker, that's a matter of opinion and I'm a tolerant person, but I drew the line at freak. And she knew I did. That's why she said it.

I glared at her and said, "You're one damn sick lady. I hope those cigarettes kill you and fast."

The students kept flowing around us. An argument between a man in a wheelchair and a green-haired punk was not considered worth stopping for. She stood there, holding onto the back of my chair, trying to get back her breath.

Then she muttered something, swallowing the words so that I couldn't make them out.

"What?" I asked.

She repeated a weak, "Sorry."

I couldn't believe my ears. Three things Henrietta never did – apologize, smile or cry. No smile was in evidence, but I distinctly heard an apology. And I feared that puckered up face could at any moment break down into tears. That I couldn't take. She must be in one massive King Kong-sized pile of shit.

"Did I hear you right?" I asked. "You're apologizing?"

"Not about the motherfucker business. You saw me and you turned and ran. If you could run. You know what I mean. You were trying to kill me. But I guess you're not a freak. I mean a complete freak."

"Henrietta, stop while you're ahead. I accept your apology. Now what do you want?"

"Who said I wanted anything?" she said. She pulled out a crumpled pack of Camels from her jeans pocket and lit up. She sucked in smoke like a whale takes in air after a thousand foot dive. Then she blew smoke in my face because she knew how much I hated it. She broke out in coughing. "Just checking in."

"Well, now that you've checked, how about taking off?"

"Can I buy you a brew at Raleigh's?"

"You buy me? You sure you're feeling alright?"

"We're friends, Crip, you know that. You need me."

"I need you? I'm not the one doing the checking in."

"But you do. You just don't want to admit it. I understand that. Crippled and all."

Henrietta, the psychologist.

"Come on, Crip," she added.

"Okay." I smiled. I had to admit I did miss the lady for some unfathomable reason. I'm Tom Bateman and I run a little private eye business over the Internet. Digging up dirt for bucks. Kind of like the NSA but on a somewhat more modest scale.

We headed back up Telegraph Avenue towards my favorite brewpub. Like we were a couple. Shit.

* * * * *

"So what's going on?" I asked as we sat in the outdoor patio at Raleigh's. It was a chilly day, but they had the gas heaters on. I knew Henrietta would insist on the outdoor area so she could smoke. And smoke she did. She had me coughing.

"Can I order you a pint?" I asked, as I placed my order with the barmaid.

Raleigh's was packed with clusters of students shouting, laughing, swallowing quantities of brew, arguing about politics and poetics. I loved the place, so goddamn alive. I never had a chance to go to college. Spent that time in 'Nam and received in return a bullet in my spine. I suppose I could've gone to college after rehab but something had changed in me. Not my love of books or knowledge. And I enjoyed the feel of a campus. That's why I live in Berkeley.

I guess I lost the passion to achieve. That bullet that got me had been random. Life was determined by chance. So what's to achieve? I was happy with just living and self-indulgent enough to read only what I wanted to read, not what was required.

I liked being paid to be a snoop. I had modest monetary needs. And the chair? The chair and I had come to terms. What I lost physically in my lower body I had more than made up for with developing my upper body. I didn't consider myself handicapped or disabled, just different.

"No brew for me. I cut that shit out," Henrietta said. "Not good for your health."

"Never figured you for a health nut. No more pot either?"

"Medicinal. Great if you've got cancer."

"But you don't have cancer. At least not yet."

"Crip, be serious. I need some advice."

Incredible. I found it hard to believe this lady really wanted my opinion on something. There would be some hook, some price. Every time I had dealings with her I got into trouble. I made the mistake a while back of hiring her as my legs on a job that I couldn't quite handle from a chair. It proved to be a disaster. She filled the air in my house with smoke, strew ashes over the furniture, tossed Big Mac wrappers and catsup-soaked fries on the floor, and devoted her time to insulting me. I insulted right back and she loved it. Now she won't leave me alone.

I took a deep sip of the pint of Full Sail that had arrived and stumbled on, "How can I help you?"

"You remember Alvin?"

"How could I forget him? Nearly got me killed the last time we met."

Henrietta's boyfriend, Alvin, was a pot farmer who had served time recently in Pelican Bay. He dragged me into a confrontation with the mob that ended in a shoot-out. That should've been the end of the fellow, except Alvin is exceptionally good at ducking bullets, running away, and leaving me to deal with the killers. Some tough guy.

"You know how he feels about his race," she said.

Alvin's body was covered with Nazi and white power tattoos.

"Like he's part of the persecuted majority, right?" I said.

"He's not prejudiced. Some of his best customers are..."

“Blacks. Very broadminded of him.”

“Alvin’s like that. He’s got this sweet nature.”

“I noticed. What about that AK-47 tattooed on his arm?”

“You’ve never really tried to get to know him.”

“If the point of this meeting is a reconciliation between Alvin and myself forget about it.”

“He’s about to do something stupid,” Henrietta said.

“That’s not new.”

“It’s not his fault he ended up in Pelican Bay.”

“You’re not going to claim he was innocent?” I asked.

“What’s that got to do with anything? I mean it’s not his fault he got caught. Alvin’s smart. Just bad luck.”

“So what’s going on this time?”

I knew I shouldn’t even ask, but she would tell me anyway. I might as well get it over with. I waved my empty pint glass at the barmaid, a blond college girl wearing a tight Peoples Republic of Berkeley tee shirt and low cut jeans that exposed a flat tummy and a marvelous navel. And I’m into navels, all except Henrietta’s. I sensed I would need the ale. I didn’t care what Henrietta said, she wasn’t going to involve me in one of Alvin’s schemes again. Beer or no beer.

She must have sensed my resistance because she quickly added, “Just advice, Crip, that’s all. It’s the White Bloods. That’s the prison gang that protected Alvin’s ass when he was at Pelican Bay.”

“I get the picture.”

“He owes them. And now that he’s out they’re making demands. And it’s not just the Bloods. It’s all of them.”

“All of who?”

“The Bloods are linked to the American Nazi Convergence, the Church of Aryan Identity, and the Avengers of the Pre-Born.”

“Great crowd.”

“You know me, Crip. I’m not political. Chills me out. I’m white and all, but so’s my parents and they’re fuckers.”

First time I heard her mention her parents. I had figured she was found under a rock when the Stones played Altamont.

“Alvin’s just a businessman,” she continued. “He doesn’t give a shit about abortion one way or another. Helped pay for one for me. And now he’s going to take out an abortion doctor.”

“Shit!”

Even for Alvin this was a bit much. And the problem was I believed Henrietta. There were fanatics out there and some were killers. There was nothing worse than a killer who believed God was on his side. Look at 9/11.

“Not kidding, Crip. The Avengers are totally mad. Can’t reason with ‘em. They view a doctor who performs abortions as a mass murderer. So they want to take ‘em out. The Reverend Ike of the Church of Aryan Identity says the Bible justifies such killings.”

“They kill and claim to be pro-life. Makes a lot of sense. And what does Alvin think?”

“He’s upset. He says it’s wrong to kill, unless it’s necessary for business. He’s got his principles.”

“So why’s he going to kill this doctor?”

“Orders.”

“From whom?”

“The White Bloods. They claim it’s an act of solidarity but I figure somebody in the Bloods is getting paid off by someone in the Avenger crowd or the Reverend Ike.”

“Why doesn’t Alvin just say no?”

“The Bloods will take Alvin out.”

“You wanted my advice and here it is. Tell the cops.”

“You got to be kidding. Then the Bloods take both me and Alvin out.”

She was in deep Godzilla doo-doo. Damn her. I had never met a person who got into the kind of messes she stumbled into. Why I ever bothered to help her out I didn’t know. This time was even worse. It was more than a matter of Henrietta. An innocent doctor’s life was at stake.

“It’s all wrong,” She continued. “Alvin’s a businessman. He will ruin his reputation if he takes out some doctor under orders from the pro-lifers. You know how divisive the abortion issue is. Told’m it would be bad for business.”

“Not to mention its effect on the doctor.”

“Now he’s pissed at me. Says I don’t understand shit. Says I wanted him to get raped in prison. Says I don’t respect my race so why should I respect life? He started preaching at me about life for Christ’s sake. Like he wanted to get on the Supreme Court. That’s not Alvin. I think the Reverend Ike’s brainwashed him. What’re we going to do?”

“We?”

“If that doctor dies it will be because you did nothing.”

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“Fuck you,” she said as she got up and began to walk out.

“Wait.”

She turned.

“What?”

“You forgot to pay.”

She reached into her pocket, then shook her head. “Left my money at home.”

She turned again and headed for the door.
“Henrietta,” I shouted after her.
She stopped.
“Come back.”
She was right. I had to do something.

* * * * *

“We’re going to stop him,” I said staring into Henrietta’s blank green eyes. She had returned to her seat opposite me in Raleigh’s patio. I heard honking above the low hum of human voices, looked up and spotted six Canadian Geese flying in formation overhead. They seemed determined to go somewhere and I doubted that it was back to the frozen North. More likely nearby Lake Merritt. Talk about illegal immigrants.

“No way am I going to let him kill a doctor,” I continued.
“Better not hurt Alvin or I’ll... I’ll.”
“You’ll what?”
“Tell the Bloods it was you.”
“Some friend.”
“I stand by Alvin no matter what.”
“True love.”

Henrietta was funny that way. She had one decent trait - loyalty. Maybe that was the reason why I put up with her. There were so many out there smiling in your face and fucking you behind your back. A lot of them had degrees and titles and worked supposedly for the disabled community. And I hate being patronized by people who would prefer to look the other way when someone who’s disabled comes down the street. We’re just people and that’s the way we prefer to be treated – as people. Henrietta’s insults could be refreshing.

“Fuck off,” she said. “I knew I shouldn’t bother with an asshole like you.”
Alright, she did have a strange way of expressing her affection.

She made an effort to get up again. I reached over and pulled her back down.

“The trouble with you and your boyfriend is you think everything can be handled with violence. Did you ever try thinking?”

“What’d you mean?”

“I mean I will stop Alvin. I mean I will do my best to keep the cops out of it, try not to hurt him or anyone else. I promise you that. But before I go around shooting at people, I intend to use my brain. We need to stop this killing by going to the source.”

“The source?”

“The person who put out the hit request. My guess is that person is Reverend Ike or at least he knows who it is. We get the hit order withdrawn, the doctor is saved, Alvin doesn’t get hurt.”

Henrietta’s scowl lessened slightly. As close to a smile as she ever gets.

“Might work.”

“So tell me everything you know about this Ike guy.”

“Nothin’ ‘cept he has this church in a rundown cottage on Howe near the cemetery in Oakland.”

“Last name?”

“Prune. Something like that.”

“Come on, That’s not a name.”

“Pru something. I got it. Pruitt.

“Now we’re getting someplace. Is he new to this area?”

“How did you know?”

“Never heard of him before. And there are not a lot white racists in Oakland. Or at least open ones.”

“I remember Alvin saying about how he came from this all-white place. They wanted to separate from America.”

“Idaho.”

“That’s it.”

“Hayden Lake.”

“How’d you know?”

“I read the papers. You ought to try it.”

“The papers are filled with lies. You should’ve seen what the *Trib* wrote about Alvin. They convicted him even before he went to trial.”

“I thought you said he was guilty.”

“That doesn’t mean he should’ve been convicted. Come on, Crip, this is the U.S. of A. It’s supposed to be a free country.”

“So all criminals should go free.”

“Of course not. There’s some real bad asses up there in Pelican Bay.”

Why I had let myself in for another one of Henrietta’s lectures on civil society I didn’t know. I suppose I hoped that one time I would, if not convince her, at least understand the weird logic that filled her head.

“Do you know the doctor’s name, the time and place of the hit?”

“No, nothing like that. Alvin said if I knew, it would endanger me.”

It was time to get on with it. A life was at stake.

“Let’s go,” I said as I backed my chair out from under the table and began a turn.

“You go ahead. I’ll catch up.”

“No. I’m not letting you out of my sight until this is all over.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“No.”

“Fuck off.”

She pulled her crumpled pack of Camels out of her jean pocket, shoved a bent cigarette into her mouth and lit up. But when I started to wheel the chair out of the patio, she followed. I looked back. What a sight. A tattoo of a face that looked like a cross between Alvin and Gilroy glared at me, her navel forming the mouth. A ring protruded as if it came from Alvin’s tongue. The frayed elastic band of her panties acted as a curtain leaving to the imagination the lower portion of Alvin. Green poked through the hole in her crotch. Color coordinated with her spiked hair. Henrietta’s kind of fashion statement.

* * * * *

I drove my van down a one-block continuation of Howe Street that dead-ended in a cemetery. The sun had set. I could barely make out a large crematorium that hovered over us on a hill to the left. The yellow glow of a weak street lamp illuminated Reverend Ike’s residence, a ramshackle little Victorian and attached buildings. If the place had been kept up, it would have been quite appealing. The cottage sported a peaked roof, gingerbread trim, and carved moldings. However, the place needed paint, vines crept up its sides, the lawn in front hadn’t been cut in years, and tall bushes were encroaching on one side.

On the other side a rotted garage containing a classic black Caddy haphazardly filled a space connecting the house to an adjoining cottage painted a sickly ochre with a tarpaper roof. The whole scene shouted time warp, a fitting habitat for a man who no doubt lamented the passing of the good old cross-burning days.

At first I thought the attached shack was uninhabited, but then I noticed an electric meter on its side, a small cross in the window, and a sign proclaiming in Gothic lettering “The Church of Aryan Identity.” It didn’t appear as if this particular brand of Christianity was flourishing. Just as well.

Henrietta had spent the afternoon curled up on my couch sleeping while I toiled away at Google supplemented with Lexis-Nexis. Lexis lists all legal actions in the country and Nexis contains newspaper accounts and much much else. Well worth the subscription price. The Reverend Ike maintained a website, but more importantly scored prominently in both lists. The man had a very good reason for leaving Idaho and I had some hard questions to ask him. But I needed more, a witness to his skullduggery. I turned to my skip trace source, available only to licensed PIs. Within minutes I could find out anyone’s address, phone number, place of employment, spouse, children, the school they went to, net worth, religious affiliation, you name it. I made couple of phone calls to confirm

what I had unearthed and felt prepared for our meeting. Our dear Reverend was in for a surprise.

I pulled the van up to the curb just past the complex. The shadow of the arched entrance to St. Mary's Cemetery loomed at the end of the road. I positioned my chair on the lift in the back of the van, pressed the controls, and was lowered to the sidewalk. A possum waddled by, ratty tail swinging, heading for the cemetery. Henrietta joined me. I scooted up the street and stopped in front of the Victorian house. I faced steep steps. No way was I getting into that place.

"What now, Crip?"

"You go in and tell the Reverend we'll meet him in the sanctuary."

"Sanctuary?"

"Like in church. The cottage past the garage. Looks like a straight run."

"Suppose he doesn't want to meet you?"

"Just tell him we have a mutual interest in abortion doctors. He'll come."

Henrietta walked up the steps and faced a rickety door where a glass panel had been replaced by plywood. No bell. She pounded on the door. It opened and Henrietta disappeared. I used the time to make a phone call. Two minutes later she emerged, followed by an old man with a receding but still brown hairline, a thin mustache and creased face. He had the shriveled neck of a turtle, wore a white shirt with a bolo tie featuring a Confederate flag clasp, and a tan fringed leather jacket. Not the kind of guy that would blend in that well in Oakland. Do better in Hayden Lake. But on this weird cul de sac surrounded by the dead, who's to notice?

He stared at me, I nodded, spun wheels, and headed towards the church building. Ike and Henrietta followed. I stopped at the pathway leading to a side door. Ike strode past me, unlocked a large brass padlock, swung open the door, and turned on the lights.

I entered a hall filled with perhaps fifty folding chairs. A pulpit dominated the far end of the room. Behind the pulpit hung a large blue banner featuring a red cross thrust diagonally through a gold crown. The words "Conquer We Must" were written above and "For Our Cause Is Just" below. An American flag stood next to the pulpit. The Reverend Ike headed straight for it. Even an audience of two was an opportunity to preach. I rolled to the front, Henrietta followed.

"What the fuck...?" she began to say.

"Shhh..." I whispered.

"Welcome to The Church of Aryan Identity."

"So?" Henrietta asked.

"We're part of the worldwide Christian Identity outreach ministry to God's chosen race."

“Which one is that?” she asked. No way was I going to shut up Henrietta.

“The White, European peoples. You are, I assume, of pure blood?” The Reverend was pissed.

“My blood is none of your fucking business,” Henrietta responded.

“You a mongrel, part mud people?”

“Why you motherfucker...” She prepared to leap at him, but I reached over and held her back.

“Let me explain, Reverend,” I quickly intervened. “We didn’t come here to discuss religion or race for that matter. However, we do have a mutual interest in abortion doctors.”

“Ah, pro-life. Jewish doctors are out there killing thousands of the unborn everyday and nobody does anything about it. It’s part of their plot to take over the world. We will not allow these murderers to continue to live and kill.”

Ike no longer looked at us. He held out one hand as if conducting a choir of angels, closed his eyes and preached to the heavens.

Before Henrietta could answer him, I spoke.

“We’re not here because we agree with you or the pro-lifers. We’re here because we also have a stake in abortion doctors. We believe in their right to life.”

“You tell ‘em Crip,” Henrietta said.

“You could say we’ve come to save you,” I said.

“What’re you talking about?” Ike’s voice was a bit shaky. He knew damn well what I was talking about.

“I’ll be frank. We know you had the White Bloods put out a contract on an abortion doctor. They have forced Alvin, a friend of Henrietta here, to carry out the hit. If he doesn’t then they will take him out.”

“None of that has anything to do with me. I can’t help it if a good Christian white man like Alvin decides to carry out the Lord’s work. While I have nothing to do with it, I applaud the young man’s courage and racial pride.”

“I’m clearly not getting through to you,” I said. “If a doctor gets killed, it’s you I’ll hold responsible.” I paused for emphasis. “I will destroy you.”

He glared at me and asked weakly.

”How do you plan to do that?”

“I’ve been doing some research on you. Remember a young woman by the name of Melissa Smith? You seduced her when she was only twelve. She gave birth to your child at thirteen.”

“Lies, all lies.”

There was a knock on the door of the sanctuary.

“Come in, Melissa,” I shouted.

A twenty-one year old black woman walked in the door. Plump figure, her soft brown eyes expressed defiance. I had called her while Henrietta was in Ike’s

house to let her know the meeting would be in the sanctuary. She held the hand of a skinny eight-year-old light-skinned girl in blue jeans and a Harry Potter tee shirt.

“That him?” I asked.

“Yes.” She turned to her child and said, “Angel, go to the car and wait. Mommy will be out shortly.”

Then she turned back to the Reverend.

“You hypocrite,” she shouted. “My mom cleaned your house and you kept staring at me when I came with her. Then one day you asked me into your bedroom. You told me to kneel by the bed and pray. Then you forced me to strip naked and you dragged me into the bed.”

“Why you fucker,” Henrietta said. She had him pegged right.

“It’s her word against mine,” he said.

“That’s the way it stood in Hayden Lake eight years ago,” I said, “when rumors first appeared in the newspapers about Melissa. That’s why you left town in a hurry. She followed you here, didn’t she? And demanded child support. You’ve been paying her. Want to give a blood sample to test DNA?”

“You will not humiliate me.”

“This matter could be left to Melissa and you. She has expressed to me a willingness to continue with the present arrangement. It would be better for Angel. However, I may go to the press with the story. Any denial on your part not backed up by a blood sample will be dismissed. What will your flock think? Miscegenation is a sin in your church. They’ll not forgive you. And having intercourse with a twelve-year-old is statutory rape. It’s up to you. If you withdraw the contract on the abortion doctor, I will keep out of it.”

The Reverend glared at me. He was a man who had devoted his whole life to hate and right that minute all that hostility was focused on me. But I had him and he knew it.

“I’m not admitting to anything, but it’s too late to stop Alvin or the Bloods.”

“The Bloods?” Henrietta said. “Alvin said it was just him.”

“That’s what he thought,” Ike said.

“I get it,” I said. “Alvin takes out the doc. The Bloods take out Alvin. No way to trace the hit back to them or you. And you blame Alvin’s death on the pro-choice crowd.”

“You scumbag!” Henrietta leapt at Ike, smashing into him with her two feet. She had this karate kick thing. He fell to the floor with Henrietta on top of him, scratching at his eyes, digging her green nails into his flesh. Henrietta could be a tiger.

“Henrietta, stop!” I shouted. “That’s not going to help.”

She didn’t stop.

“Use your head. Ike here needs to tell us the target, the time, the place. Otherwise we can’t stop Alvin.”

She lifted herself off Ike, who shrank to the corner of the room.

“Okay Ike, give us the plan. You’re into salvation. The only way you can save yourself now is to help us stop Alvin.”

“It’s too late.” He looked at his watch. “Coming down in fifteen minutes.”

“Where? Who?”

“The target’s Doctor Rachel Fein, when she leaves her weekly evening clinic, at the Planned Family Center on Macarthur near Telegraph, next to the Royal Motel.”

I pulled out my cell phone, dialed information for the phone number of the clinic, and called. I got a voice recording. Fuck.

“Let’s go,” I said to Henrietta, spinning my titanium wheels as I raced towards the sanctuary’s door.

I turned and faced the quivering racist.

“Reverend, you get on your phone and track down the Bloods. I don’t want them hounding Alvin in the future. Or any of you killing doctors. And I suggest you start praying that I stop Alvin and the Bloods.”

* * * * *

“What do we do now?” Henrietta asked as we careened down Broadway towards Macarthur. Luckily, the clinic was only about five minutes away.

“I’ll think of something.”

“What you’re saying is you haven’t any idea what to do.”

“Just shut up, Henrietta. For once in your life keep that trap of yours closed. I can’t think if you’re talking.”

She glowered at me, but kept quiet. Silence didn’t help. I really hadn’t the foggiest idea what to do. We had a doctor to save from an AK-47-toting boyfriend and there was the no small matter of a mob of racist ex-felon thugs. In ten minutes we could very well be among the corpses piled up on the street in front of the clinic.

I knew one thing and one thing only – somehow I would protect that doctor. If I died so be it. I’d faced death before in ‘Nam. I could handle it in Oakland. I wasn’t sure why I felt so strongly about the killing of Dr. Fein, but damn it, I did. Henrietta, by informing me of the coming hit, burdened me with preventing it.

Then it came to me. I could see Alvin lying in the darkness stalking Fein with a rifle the way I had been stalked in ‘Nam. It was not the same as facing your killer eye to eye. That doctor was being reduced to no more than an innocent deer running blindly through a forest. I was not about to allow that.

And we were talking about a doctor at the other end of the scope. Doctors saved me in 'Nam when I got that bullet in my spine. I pay my debts. Tonight was payback time.

I reached Macarthur, turned and slowly drove past the facility. I didn't want to cause attention. Then I swung a u-turn at Telegraph and proceeded up the other side of the street. I paused across from the facility. The building was constructed like an American Embassy in an Al Qaeda controlled country – steel screens where windows should be, no sign out front, bombproof I suspected. A carport occupied the front portion of the first floor. It was separated from the sidewalk by a high wrought-iron fence. An entrance permitted only one car in or out.

Inside the carport a floodlight revealed only a single car. Must be Fein's. Made sense from a security point of view. Patients and doctors could drive right in and out avoiding hostile pickets on the sidewalk. All Dr. Fein would have to do tonight was walk out the clinic door at the rear of the carport, step into a brightly-lit area, get in her car, and then exit. I therefore assumed the plan was to hit the car on its way out of the facility.

Where would Alvin be? A huge elm, taller than the building, dominated the front. I saw a slight movement in its shadow. He must be hiding behind it. No sign of the Bloods, but I knew they weren't far away.

I started the van, drove until there was a break in the median, and made another u-turn, then pulled to the curb about fifteen feet from the building. Finally a plan came to me. Probably suicidal, but a plan.

"Can I speak?" Henrietta snarled.

"You listen to me, and you listen carefully. I expect you to do exactly what I tell you. No questions asked, not the slightest deviation from my instructions. Or else Fein, Alvin, you and I die."

"You serious?"

"Never more so in my entire life."

"Remember, no cops. We stop Alvin but he can't go back to jail. You know what the Bloods will do to him there."

"He'll get his chance, but we're saving that doctor." I checked my watch. "We have only a minute or two. I'm getting out of the van and will position my chair on the sidewalk. You reach over and drive the van, using the hand controls. Simple really. Proceed very slowly up the street towards the clinic. Be sure the van is between me and the road at all times. When we get to the tree, I'll leave you. That's where Alvin is. You proceed to the carport's entrance, block it, pull the emergency break and fall to the floor. Don't move no matter what happens."

"What do you expect to happen?"

"Shit."

“And you?”

“I’ll tackle Alvin.”

“How do you plan to do that?”

“My problem.”

I scooted the chair back, lowered it with the lift, and started down the sidewalk. Henrietta followed with the van as instructed. I paused a second to pull out my cell and speed dial 911. Tucking the phone under my chin, I called for police backup as I continued down the street. Alvin would get his chance to get away, but the safety of Fein was more important. So far everything was going according to plan, but it was too damn quiet. I knew the Bloods were out there somewhere.

Did Alvin notice us? I didn’t think so. He was preoccupied preparing for the hit. I could make him out now, rifle in hand, behind the tree. I was only five feet away. I spotted a figure in a white coat in the carport area. In seconds she had ducked into a Toyota Prius. Good.

Now. I spun my wheels as if I were racing in the Special Olympics, heading straight for Alvin. Henrietta gunned the engine of the van and plowed its front-end directly into the gap in the fence. Alvin got off a shot at the van just as I bashed my chair into him. He fell to the ground.

I swung the chair over, falling to the ground next to Alvin, using the seat as a temporary shield. Alvin reached for his gun and began to rise.

“No!” I shouted, pulling him back down. At that very moment two black SUVs sped down the street, Uzis sticking out windows. The cars stopped in front of the clinic, bullets sprayed the van and us. The noise was deafening. Alvin screamed. He’d been hit. I looked down at my legs. One of them was bleeding, but I felt nothing.

The one advantage of being crippled.

“Let’s go,” I yelled at Alvin. I used my hands to pull the dead weight of my body as I slithered towards the van. Kind of like a snake. I have great strength in my arms from weight lifting and wheelchair racing. Alvin followed me. Bullets struck the sidewalk spewing concrete in my eyes. I kept crawling. I was back in ‘Nam, jungle around me, snipers firing, and monkeys, high in the trees, howling.

Somehow I reached the van. Sirens. Roar of engines, screech of tires as the SUVs took off. Silence. The Bloods were gone. Henrietta began screaming.

“Who the Hell was that?” Alvin asked.

“Your friends, the Bloods. You okay?”

“Thanks, Dude,” Alvin muttered.

Bullet eyes that matched his dense black close-cropped hair softened just slightly. He raised himself from the ground, his tank top revealing bulging biceps covered with tattoos. The swastika on his left arm was now partially

obscured by blood. I could barely make out the words “White Power” below it. Sprinting towards Telegraph, he carried his AK-47 in his other hand.

Three cop cars, sirens blaring, swung around the van. Cops pulled their guns out of their holsters and surrounded me. A young woman with glasses and short curly hair, wearing a white coat, joined the circle. Then I heard screaming coming from the van. Two cops dragged a scratching, spitting Henrietta out and onto the sidewalk. They cuffed her.

“You the one who made the 911 call?” a cop asked me.

“Yes.”

“What’s going on?”

“Dunno. Henrietta and I just dropped by to pick up some condoms. Better safe than sorry. I was in my chair heading for the entrance of the clinic when these two black SUVs passed by spraying us and the front of the building with bullets. I called 911. Henrietta crashed into the carport’s entrance. I tried to crawl to the van and check her out. Then you guys showed up.”

“We don’t dispense condoms outside regular office hours,” Dr. Fein said.

“I was misinformed.”

The End

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THE PREDATORS

by

Justin Gustainis

*JUSTIN GUSTAINIS attended college at the University of Scranton, a Jesuit university that figures prominently in several of his writings. Following military service, he held a variety of jobs, including speechwriter and professional bodyguard, before earning a Ph.D. at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Mr. Gustainis currently lives in Plattsburgh, New York, where he is a Professor of Communication at Plattsburgh State University. His two novels in print are **The Hades Project**, and **Black Magic Woman**.*

Dan Bright waved to his daughter Shelly, who had just boarded the school bus and found a seat at the window. She waved back, but was then drawn into a conversation with two other fourth-graders sitting nearby. They were still conferring, solemn as diplomats, when the bus pulled away from the curb.

A few minutes later, Bright let himself in through the front door of his big, old house and walked down the length of the central hallway to the kitchen, from which the scents of breakfast still lingered.

His first step into the kitchen revealed that his wife Marilyn was still sitting at the dinette table, a cup of coffee in front of her. But something had changed: her posture, usually relaxed and lazy in the morning, had given way to tension and alertness.

Bright's next step showed him why. There was a man sitting opposite his wife, a man with sunglasses and a hat and a gun.

The gun, a big automatic, was resting on the dinette table, its barrel lined up with the center of Marilyn Bright's chest.

Bright stood perfectly still. The man glanced up, showing no surprise at Bright's return.

"Come on in," he drawled. "Join the party."

Before Bright could say anything, another male voice spoke from directly behind him.

"Go on, sit down. You won't be late for work. Hell, they're not even expectin' you 'til around 9:30."

As Bright walked stiffly over to the table, the first man said with a grin, "Yeah, ain't that what they call *banker's hours*?"

* * * * *

Louise Fitzsimmons fished a couple of Advil out of the bottle she kept in her desk and washed them down with a mouthful of lukewarm coffee. Every tree, flower and bush in town was apparently blooming this morning, and the pollen had Louise's sinuses pounding like a jackhammer.

She tried to ignore the pain and concentrate on the computer printout in front of her. It was a record of the bank's financial activity from the day before and Mister Bright always asked her for a brief summary as soon as he arrived in the morning. She checked the clock on her desk: just past 8:40. No need to hurry, then. It was Louise's job as Assistant Manager to open up at 8:00, but the bank was closed to customers until 10:00, and Mister Bright never arrived before 9:30. There was plenty of time.

But half a minute later, as Louise looked up at the sound of the employees' door opening, she realized that there was no time left at all, because Mister Bright, impossibly early, had come through that door and was headed straight for her office. Louise's headache took a sudden turn for the worse.

Trailing along behind Mr. Bright was a man Louise had never seen before. He wore a Panama hat and aviator-style sunglasses with a navy blue suit, and for an instant Louise flashed on an image of Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lecter from that movie she'd seen on HBO, but she banished the frivolous thought at once.

Nancy Burgess, the head teller, called to the stranger from behind the counter. "Sir, I'm sorry, but the bank isn't open yet. Sir? *Sir!*"

Without breaking stride, Mr. Bright turned his head toward Nancy and snapped, "Shut up -- he's with me!"

Even from where she was sitting, Louise Fitzsimmons could see Nancy's eyes widen. Mr. Bright *never* talked to employees like that. Hell, Louise had heard him fire people with more politeness than most executives would use when hiring them.

As Mr. Bright reached the door of her office, Louise saw that his face was pale and tight, like a cancer patient whose Demerol is overdue. He plopped down in one of Louise's visitor chairs, but his companion remained standing near the door. After a silent nod to Louise, the stranger turned his attention to the counter, behind which the four tellers were preparing for the day's business, even as they gossiped in whispers about Bright's outburst.

"Louise," Mr. Bright said, "I've got a problem, a big one, and I'm going to need your help."

Louise nodded, her puzzlement growing by the second. Looking up at the other man, she said,

"Sir -- I'm, sorry, but I don't know your name -- you're welcome to sit down, if you like."

The man turned to her again and, with a slight smile, shook his head. Then he went back to his survey of the tellers.

"Mister Bright," Louise began, "I don't --"

"They've got Marilyn."

Louise's mouth remained open, but no sound came out.

"They'll kill her if we don't do exactly what they want," Bright said grimly.

"They, uh, I mean -- they *who*?"

Bright jabbed a thumb in the direction of the stranger. "This one and his partner."

Louise closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mister Bright, I don't mean to be stupid, I really don't, but I just don't understand what's going on."

Bright took in a big breath and let it out slowly through his nose.

"I know, Louise, it's a shock." He spoke slowly, deliberately. "I feel like I've been pole-axed, myself. *But I need you with me on this.* Will you help me, Louise?"

Louise had started nodding before Bright finished speaking. "Yessir. Of course, sir. Whatever I can do."

"All right, then. Let me try to explain this mess we're in. There isn't a lot of time."

Louise nodded again, frown lines furrowing her brow.

"I walked Shelly to the school bus stop this morning. I wasn't gone more than fifteen minutes. When I got home, there were two strange men waiting, this guy--" Bright pointed with his chin, "--and another one. They must have been waiting for me to leave before they broke in. They had guns. They said they'd kill us both if I didn't agree to do what they wanted. I believed them. I still do."

Bright leaned forward in his chair. "They want me to help them rob the bank, Louise."

Louise Fitzsimmons said nothing, but her eyes started blinking rapidly, making her look like the ingenue in some old silent movie.

"The other man is still in my house, with my wife. She's a hostage, Louise. Both these guys have cell phones. They showed me."

As if on cue, the man standing by the office window reached into the pocket of his suit coat and produced a gray cellular phone, held it for a moment where Louise could see it, then replaced it in his pocket. He did all of this without once taking his eyes from the tellers' counter.

"If I don't do what they want," Bright said grimly, "or of anything goes wrong, this man will call his partner, who will run. But before he leaves my house, he told me, he'll take a few minutes to leave me a 'present,' as he called it.

He said it would be something that would give me an upset stomach for the rest of my life."

Bright's voice broke on the last couple of words, but he regained control with a visible effort that took at least half a minute.

Finally, he said, "Now you know why I need you on my side, Louise. Will you help me?"

"Of course I will, Mister Bright. Anything you want, you know that."

"We have to play this their way, until I'm sure that Marilyn is safe. That means no police, no FBI, nothing. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"And they already know about the various tricks that we use during robberies. They've apparently done their *homework*." Bright's voice was bitter. "So, no dye packs, none of the marked bills, no taking bills out of the drawer that sets off the silent alarm. None of that, understand?"

Louise sent a single, terrified glance in the direction of the man in the Panama hat, then turned back to her boss. "Yes, sir, I understand. Completely."

"I hate this as much as you do, believe me," Bright said. "But until Marilyn is safe, they're calling the tune."

He stood up.

"They had me bring suitcases in my car, to hold the money. Once I get them, he and I will be going behind the counter, to the tellers' drawers and then the vault. While I'm out getting the suitcases, I want you to talk to the tellers. Explain the situation, and tell them we need their quiet cooperation. Be very sure you make clear what's at stake here, all right?"

Louise got to her feet. "Yes sir. You can rely on me, Mister Bright."

As she walked on unsteady legs toward the tellers' counter, Louise Fitzsimmons thought about her boss's wife, who she both knew and liked.

Poor Marilyn, she must be terrified. I hope these bastards don't hurt her.

* * * * *

Marilyn Bright lay naked and spread-eagled, her wrists and ankles tied to the four posts of the queen-size bed she normally shared with her husband. Her blonde hair was in wild disarray now, her lipstick smeared, her taut body covered with a sheen of perspiration.

The man grunting on top of her was the same one who had been sitting at the family breakfast table when Dan Bright returned from seeing his daughter off to school. The man had been lightly disguised then, with a hat and big sunglasses. But he had taken those articles off some time ago, along with the rest of his clothes.

As the man thrust into her, over and over, Marilyn Bright strained and writhed against her bonds, leaving angry red marks on her flesh. Eyes closed, breath coming in gasps, she was whispering into the ear of the man, whose face was buried in the side of her neck. *"Yes, like that, like that, oh God, Steve, yes, just like that, faster, yes, just like that, baby, oh yes, oh my God, yesss. . . ."*

* * * * *

Daniel Bright carried the two big suitcases behind the bank's service counter, placed them on the nearest desk, and opened them. The four female tellers were staring at him as if he had just beamed down from a spaceship.

"Listen to me," Bright said, his voice harsh with tension. "I know that Louise has brought you into the picture, but I want to be sure that everyone understands what's at risk here."

He looked at each of them in turn, his gaze both angry and pleading at the same time. "I know what you've been trained to do in the event of a robbery -- I ought to, since I'm the one who trained you. But we're faced with a situation that the training wasn't designed for. If anyone here trips a silent alarm, my wife Marilyn dies, probably quite horribly. If anyone tries to sneak a dye pack in with the money, my wife dies. After the two of us leave here, if anyone calls the police or FBI before hearing from me, my wife dies."

Bright made a gesture toward the man in the Panama hat and sunglasses. "And I should mention that the threat against my wife isn't the only one to worry about. He's carrying a gun--" The man briefly pulled back his suit jacket to reveal the pistol stuck in his waistband."--and I'm convinced that he's prepared to use it, if necessary. Don't any of you bet your life that he's not."

Bright paused for a deep breath then continued, sounding a little calmer. "Look, I know how galling this is -- believe me, nobody hates it more than I do. After we leave here, this man is going to drop me off someplace where I'll have a long walk to get to a phone. After that, it'll be our turn: the authorities will be notified, and we'll all be giving statements and answering questions and looking at mug shots for days, probably. But right now, I need you, all of you, to help me save my wife's life. Will you do that -- for her sake?"

The nods and murmurs of assent were unanimous. "All right, then," Bright said quietly. "Thank you. I won't forget this."

He turned to the man in the Panama hat. "What do you want first?" he asked grimly. "The tellers' drawers?"

Receiving a nod of assent, Bright said to Louise Fitzsimmons, "Will you open up the vault, please? That's going to be our next stop."

* * * * *

"Untie my hand," Marilyn Bright said. "The right one. I want a cigarette."

"Sure," the man named Steve said. As he approached the bed he added, "I'll untie all four of 'em, if you want. We got time."

"No, better not. If you do, I might forget and get out of bed. Don't want to spoil the crime scene."

The man finished unknotting the cord from her wrist, handed her a cigarette from his pack, and lit it. "Don't matter none," he said with a shrug. "I'll truss you all up tight again before I go."

She shook her head. "I don't want to take the chance that these rope burns won't match up with the way I'm tied," she said. "Don't forget: the FBI will be going over this place with a fine-tooth comb. They'll check every little body hair, every bit of fiber—and every drop of your joy juice, which I can feel leaking out of me even now."

He looked, then with a mild leer said, "Damn, you're right. And a mighty pretty picture it do make, too."

She took a drag on her cigarette then said, "It wouldn't be so pretty if the forensics experts found a few drops of it in the kitchen, or someplace. She made her voice lower, in mimicry of a man's: *"Now Mrs. Bright, do you expect this court to believe that the intruder you've described tied you up, raped you, and then untied you and allowed you to wander around your house, leaving small quantities of his semen everywhere you went?"*

In her normal voice, she said, "No, it's better if I stay like this."

He nodded his understanding and continued to stand there quietly, watching her smoke, noticing how careful she was not to let any ash fall on her.

After a few minutes he said, "So, when are you gonna give hubby the news?"

She extinguished her cigarette carefully.

"Which news?"

"About you and me. About our plans."

"That's going to have to wait awhile, until all the fuss has died down, which could take some time. This bank robbery is going to attract a hell of a lot of attention -- FBI, State Police, the media, God knows who else. Dan and I are going to be under the microscope, probably for months, and we'll have to act completely normal." She smiled ruefully. "So that means I'm stuck with the big dummy a little longer. Think I'm worth waiting for?"

He smiled back.

"Lady, I fuckin' *know* you are."

"Well, all right, then. You just see that you *do* wait, instead of taking up with some bimbo. I'm not losing you now, after all we've been through."

"You know, I been thinkin'." His smile was gone now. "When you do get around to tellin' Danny-boy that you want a divorce, he's liable to get pretty ugly about it. And even if he don't, you'd most likely end up with only half of what he's got, anyway."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, that's true. Community property, and all that."

"Besides, how you gonna hit him up for half of your share from this score? You can't tell no judge about *that*."

"God, I hadn't even thought about it, but you're right," she said, frowning. "So, what've you got in mind?"

"Well, there's all kinds of divorce, you know. There's the kind we was just talkin' about, with judges and lawyers and all that crap."

She nodded for him to go on.

"Then there's the other kind," he said. "The one where hubby lies down one day and don't get back up, on account of being dead."

Marilyn Bright let a slow smile spread across her face. "Now, that's an idea with possibilities. I like the way you think, Steve."

He tried to look modest. "Well, I didn't go to no fancy college like you and Danny-boy, but that don't mean I'm a dummy, neither."

"Of course you're not," she said. "You've got natural smarts, like a fox."

She pondered for a while.

"We'll have to be very careful, the way we do it."

"Yeah, I know. But we got time to figure something that'll look right, like a accident or somethin'."

"Absolutely. Then it'll be just you and me. You and me and all that money. . . ." She let her voice trail off, then said, "Listen, I'm wondering if maybe we shouldn't leave a knife on the nightstand, just a little extra proof of how you forced me. Maybe you could even cut me, just a little. I can say you did it to scare me into lying still while you tied me up."

He shrugged. "We can do it that way, if you want."

"Tell you what, take a look in the kitchen. There's a set of chef's knives on the counter, in one of those wooden block things. Bring one in here, would you, honey? Get a big one."

He gave a bark of laughter. "Yeah, I already knew how you like them big ones. Okay, just a sec."

She held her smile until he was out of the room, then slowly brought her right hand over the edge of the mattress and down the side of the bed, where it remained. Then she lay back and listened for the sound of his returning footsteps. She did not have to wait long.

* * * * *

Rick Shartrelle took off his Panama hat and dropped it on the floor of the van, but kept the sunglasses on. He no longer needed them for disguise, but he liked to look at his image in the side view mirror, and he thought the shades made him appear mysterious and dangerous. That's how he had thought of himself all through the time spent in the bank: a silent, menacing figure, kind of like Clint Eastwood in one of those old spaghetti westerns on TV. The tellers had apparently seen the same movies, since they had been scared green by his brooding persona. *The Bank Robber with No Name*. Rick Shartrelle had loved every second of it.

Turning to his passenger, he asked, "You got it counted yet?"

"I'm almost done," Dan Bright said.

A couple of minutes later, just as Shartrelle was turning onto a secondary road that looked to be all uphill, Bright said, "Looks like 284,960 bucks. Approximately."

Shartrelle broke into a grin, pumped his right fist a couple a times and exclaimed "Yee-haw!"

As the van begun its climb of the pothole-strewn road, Shartrelle asked, "You usually have that much cash lying around there?"

"No, we don't, as a matter of fact," Bright told him. "But every other Friday is payday for about half the firms in the area. Most people who deposit their checks want some cash back to get them through the weekend. That adds up, when you consider the number of depositors we have."

"When in doubt, ask the expert," Shartrelle said with a grin. "So, half of that comes to what?"

"About 143,000 dollars. Keep in mind that my count could be off a little. It's best to do this kind of work with a calculator, and I forgot to bring one."

"Well, we can count it together, once we get there."

"Good idea," Bright said, nodding. "Slow down, you're going to turn right up here, just past the sign. See it?"

Shartrelle applied the brake. "Sign says *Road Closed*, man. Are we gonna be able to get up there?"

"Sure, no problem. They've just got a couple of sawhorses up at the top, probably to discourage kids from going parking. Easy enough to move them -- I did it myself when I was there last time."

A few minutes later, the van came to a stop in a big, open area, near an old, weather-beaten sign that read *Knoxville Mining Co., Shafts #7 and #8*. Parked nearby was an old Toyota Corolla.

The two men got out of the van. Shartrelle looked at the car and said, "When did you leave this heap up here?"

Bright thought for a moment. "Nine days ago."

"How the hell'd you get home, after?"

"Brought a bicycle with me. I broke it down and stowed part in the trunk, the rest in the back seat. Only took me ten minutes to reassemble it."

"Bicycle, huh? That's pretty slick."

Bright shrugged. "I have my moments."

"Well, what say we spend some moments countin' all that lovely money, so we can make the split?"

"Weren't you going to call Steve, first?"

"Shit, that's right. He'll be wondering how everything went." Shartrelle reached into a pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

"While you're doing that, I'll make sure this junker is going to start for me." Bright produced a set of car keys and walked over to the Toyota.

Shartrelle switched the cell phone on and began to tap in numbers. From behind him, he heard the squeal of rusty metal as Bright got the Toyota's door open.

* * * * *

Marilyn Bright was sitting naked on the side of the bed smoking another cigarette when the cell phone next to her rang. She took one last drag and stubbed out the butt before answering. "Hello?"

After a pause, Rick Shartrelle's voice said, "What the hell're you doin' answering Steve's phone?"

"He's in the bathroom. Can't the poor guy even take a leak?"

"Well, yeah, but --"

"I figured if nobody answered you'd get all bent out of shape, so I decided I'd better do it, okay?"

"Oh." Another pause. "How come he didn't just take the phone into the can with him?"

She let impatience show in her voice. "Gee, I don't know, Rick, why don't you ask him yourself? The toilet just flushed, so he ought to be out here in a second."

"Damn, I told him not to --"

She heard it then, the noise from the tiny speaker that she had been waiting for, the sound of the shot.

There was a clatter in her ear, as if someone had dropped the phone onto hard ground.

When she heard Shartrelle's voice again, it seemed distant, and the words sounded like they were being squeezed out through tightly clenched teeth.

"*Bright, you bastard, you fuckin' --*"

Another shot stopped the obscene tirade.

Dan Bright's voice came on the line. You still there?"

"Yes, I'm here. Sounds like you got it done."

"Yeah, even if it did take me two bullets to do it. How'd it go on your end?"

"Perfectly." She let her eyes rest on Steve briefly. "Ligature marks, semen, and his fingerprints on a nice, sharp carving knife."

She made her voice sound panicky:

"Honest, officer, after he raped me he said he was gonna kill me anyway. I managed to get one hand loose and reach our burglar gun just as he was coming at me with that big, big, knife. I had to do it!"

"Okay, Ms. Streep, save it for the Grand Jury."

"Oh, I will, believe me." She worked a fresh cigarette out of the pack one-handed. "So, how much did we get?"

"About 285K."

"Nice! That's even better than we hoped."

"I know, I know." The grin on his face was evident in his voice. "Look, I'd better go. There's a lot of cleaning up to do, yet."

"Which shaft are you going to use?"

"Number eight. That's the deepest, according to the records."

She lit her cigarette, took a deep drag. "So, the earliest the *gendarmes* are likely to come busting in here is...?"

"Three hours minimum. It'll take me at least that long to finish here and drive over to Clark County, so I can come stumbling out of the woods looking suitably disheveled. But don't worry if it takes longer."

"All right, I won't. I'll practice looking traumatized and sick with worry."

"And be sure you're not holding that .38 when the cavalry gets there. Some of these SWAT guys will key in on the weapon, without thinking about who's holding it. We don't want some trigger-happy rookie opening fire before he knows the score."

She expelled smoke in a soft laugh.

"Stop worrying, babe. The tough part's over, and in three or four hours we'll be home free."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Actually, I'm surprised it's gone so smoothly. I checked Rick and Steve out pretty thoroughly before we approached them, remember, and those two are not exactly virgins. They're supposed to be good at this stuff."

"Well, they were."

She looked again at Steve, who lay on his back in a puddle of blood, eyes staring at nothing, his face frozen in an expression of shock that was almost comical.

A broad smile grew on Marilyn Bright's face, the kind of grin you might associate with a lioness standing over the body of a fat zebra whose neck she has just broken.

The smile stayed in place as she said, "*But we're better.*"

The End

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MISSING, BUT NOT MISSED

A Bo Fexler Short Story

by

Clair Dickson

Clair Dickson is a bitter, cynical Alternative High School Teacher with a dark sense of humor, a weakness for word play, and a love of Crime Noir and Hardboiled detectives. The best part of her job is that she gets to teach fun courses like Movies vs. Books and read Raymond Chandler! Her Bo Fexler stories have appeared in Muzzle Flash, Sons of Spade, Yellow Mama, Mysterical-E, and New Mystery Reader.

"The last time I saw her was when she decided to run off with that *boy*," Marie reported almost levelly. The last word, however, bore the full weight of her disgust and resentment. On paper it would have been underlined several angry times.

She tapped the ash from the end of her cigarette and looked at me.

With the smoke of her next drag, she asked, "Who even sent you looking for Jess anyway?"

"Abby."

"Hmph," was Marie's reply at the mention of her not-missing daughter. "She's paying you for this."

I nodded.

"Jess ain't worth finding. Abby's wasting her money."

"Helps with the unemployment rate."

"Huh?"

"If I wasn't doing this, I probably wouldn't have a job."

She didn't smile.

I thought it was funny.

"So. Who was the boy?"

She hissed the name, "Alan Stihles."

"And what was so bad about him?"

"The drugs. Heroin. He never would keep a job for long 'cause he'd get so wasted so often. Not sure how he even got the money to buy what he used either." She tipped her head, forehead creased. Looked to me like she wanted me to give an answer.

"Probably by selling it to others who don't know how else to get any."

She *humphed*.

I asked, "Do you know where Jess and Alan moved to?"

"No. Jess wouldn't tell me."

"What did she say when you asked?"

She narrowed her eyes.

"We didn't say much when all that was going on. I gotta get dinner ready."

"Just one last thing," I put in quickly. "Does his family live around here?"

"Yeah. That trailer park by the expressway."

"East or west side?"

"I don't know that. The one with the real trailers, not the new kind that look like houses."

"Thanks."

The torn screen door slammed shut as Marie retreated into her tiny home. I went back to my car and looked up Alan Stihles. My phone disc showed no local listings. Expanding my search to the whole state got me twice that number. In another search, I found the local address for Alex and Raina Stihles in the trailer park east of the expressway.

Driving there, I realized that the Stihles trailer was backed-up right against US-23.

The whoosh-roar of the e-way traffic overwhelmed all other sounds, and most of the thoughts in my blond head. I was surprised my knock at the door could be heard inside.

Raina filled the doorway, feet planted on trunk-like legs.

"Yeah?"

"Bo Fexler. I'm a private eye. I'm looking for Alan."

"That all?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ma'am?" She chuckled and shook her head. "Alan moved to Cadillac. He got a job at this little motel. Handyman, I think."

"Could I get his address?"

"Nope. Don't have it. I don't much write letters. And I don't travel."

"Ah. Well, which hotel does he work at?"

"Motel. Bear Wood Motel. Right off 115."

"Thanks."

"I guess I should tell you I haven't heard from him in a while," she said slowly, this strange smile on half her face.

"Gee, thanks. How long is a while?"

"Couple months. Maybe three."

"Any idea why?"

She shrugged.

"He gets himself into trouble sometimes. Maybe he had a problem with the girlfriend?"

"With Jess?"

"You're as slow in the head as you are talking," she chuckled at me.
"Yeah, with Jess. Girl he had before that got a restraining order against him."

"Why?"

"Cause he didn't like her dumping him."

"Ah."

"Huccome you can't talk right?"

I ignored the question-- I don't often acknowledge my speech impairment--
and handed her my business card.

"If you hear anything about Alan or Jess, give me a call."

"I won't." She flicked the card back into my face with a laugh.

"Fuck you, too, ma'am."

She slammed the door. I lit up a cigarette. I might have also lit up a bridge
I'd want to cross again later.

Regardless, I pointed my car northwest.

* * * * *

The Bear Woods Motel was about ten miles beyond Cadillac. The tall pine
trees were threatening to reclaim the land that the little row of cabin-rooms
stood on. Two cabins were already receding into the woods. The paths to them
were overgrown, the lawn no longer mowed.

The face of the elderly proprietor was in a similar state when he came to
the front desk. He looked like he could have been the original owner of the Bear
Woods Motel. Back before the Interstate highway system diverted most
travelers from the quaint little stops along the US highways.

"Hello there, little lady. What can I do for you?"

"Look, I'm not little, and I'm not a lady," I answered. I stood my full five-
foot ten and a half inches to show the former. "I am, however, a private eye, and
I'm told Alan Stihles works for you."

He bent his head, then after a moment, confirmed, "He did."

"What happened?"

"He missed a couple days in a row. I called him to tell him that if he didn't
show up he was out of a job. His girl answered and said something about him
not caring. Though, she sounded like she was drunk or something and hung up
real quick. That was about three weeks ago. I wanted Alan to help get the place
spruced up since we get more travelers in the summer."

"Do you have his address?"

"Well, probably. Lemme check." He shuffled into the rear of the
building. After several minutes of shuffling through papers, he returned. "You
were looking for Alan, right? Dark haired boy?"

I nodded slowly.

"Yeah. He worked for you."

"Right, right. I don't remember as good as I used to. Well, here's the address for you, little lady. Anything else I can do for you?"

I folded the paper several times. "How long has Alan been working for you?"

"Oh, couple weeks now. We're getting ready for the summer season. Get more travelers in the summer."

"How many guests do you think you got last summer?"

"Oh, I don't know. Back in the fifties, I used to have this place booked full every night."

"Do you think Alan would know how many people you got last summer?"

"Oh, he might. You'd have to ask him."

"Where can I find him?"

"He's not in today. He was supposed to come in and help spruce the place up. Since we don't get a lot of guests in the winter, I don't have much money for hired help."

"When's Alan supposed to be in next?"

"Let me check the schedule." He leaned over the desk to read the calendar. His forehead crinkled up, but when he straightened he was smiling. "Well, now, he's supposed to be in tomorrow, but he's been out the last week. Out sick," he added. Probably because it fit with the information he was piecing together on the fly.

I felt sorry for him. And desperately hoped that my mind wouldn't deteriorate like a sandcastle in the rain.

"Oh. Well, I have his address. I'll pay him a visit."

"I was gonna say, if you needed his address, I could give it to you."

"You already did. Thank you. Can I get your name?"

"Lou. Lou Trellentia. I've owned this place for fifty five years. Bought it with a friend of mine right out of high school."

"Yeah."

I nodded a farewell. I didn't see any other cars as I drove the few minutes to the address. I could barely make out the driveway on approach and ended up driving past it. There weren't any driveways nearby-- or any traffic-- so I made a quick U-turn.

Pulling into the driveway, the first thought I had was that the trailer had been skinned. Metal sheeting had peeled off the blue and white and rusting trailer. An old green pick up truck was parked less than two feet from the front steps. A breeze whispered through the pine needles as I stepped onto hard packed dirt.

This place was about as well-maintained as the Bear Wood Motel. Perhaps an indicator of the quality of handyman work Alan did. Paint flakes stuck to my knuckles when I knocked on the door.

The only sound was the breeze. Then, a car tires hummed by on the road behind me.

After a third knock, I leaned off the porch to peer into the window. Inside was dark. And trashed. It looked more like someone had wrecked the place, rather than someone had a habit of never picking up after oneself. I cupped my hand around my face to see better.

Giving up on the view from that window, I tromped around the trailer, looking for another or a better view inside. There was a small deck on the rear, complete with overturned charcoal kettle grill. I stepped over the fallen lid and looked inside. I thought I saw a leg. I squinted into the dark, then banged on the window.

The leg didn't move. I took out my cell phone, but there was no signal. I banged on the window again.

The back door was locked. So was the front. I circled back around to the deck, having noticed that the door was loose in its frame. I jiggled the handle. Sticking the blade of my pocket knife into the unusually large gap between door and frame allowed me to go in to the trailer.

The smell stopped me in my tracks.

Not even the scents of alcohol, trash, rot or mold that also permeated the small trailer could compete with the smell of death. I coughed, almost gagged. I put the cigarette in my mouth and had the flame to it before I realized that might be damaging a crime scene. I tucked the cigarette over my ear and proceeded very slowly onto the swirl-patterned green, orange, and brown carpet. I wasn't sure how much was manufactured pattern and how much was aftermarket.

I rounded the corner to find what remained of a young man lying across the narrow hallway to the bedroom and bathroom. Something was clenched in his hand. I pulled my shirt over my mouth and nose as I bent to see if I could identify the paper. It looked like a pizza brochure. Swallowing to keep my lunch in place, I noticed that the expiration dates for the coupons were from just last week.

I poked around the rest of the trailer before stepping over Alan's body to the bedroom. My feet planted roots in the doorway.

I had found Jess.

The belt and syringe lay on the bed next to her, as if she had just finished. Several moments passed before I could pull myself away from the tragic scene. I stepped back over Alan and exited the trailer. The smell of pine, and of cigarette smoke, was a welcome change. After burning the cigarette down to the

filter, I walked to the road, cell phone in hand like some sort of tricorder. Finally, a few yards down the road, I spontaneously came into a strong cell phone signal, which I used to call the police and report my findings. I told them I was in the house. In order to make that true, I returned to the trailer.

One of the first things I noticed was the puddle of blood around Alan's head. There wasn't enough blood on the carpet to be the cause of his death, but it might be a contributing factor. I pushed his head with the end of the TV remote, but that only caused his flesh to bend in unnatural ways. My whole body shuddered, I dropped the remote, and turned away to look for any blunt objects-turned weapon.

I was in the kitchen, looking carefully around the sink when I heard the sound of car doors slamming outside the thin walls. I poked at the sponge, then tipped it up with a dirty spoon. The underside was very red. Either tomato sauce or blood red. They both appear similar in an old yellow scrubbie sponge left on the edge of the sink.

Amongst several other dishes in a drying rack, there was a heavy cast iron pan. It was well worn and too heavy to show any marks. But it would have made a fine weapon. Turning toward the door, I noticed the thick line of dirt around the fridge. The middle of the floor had been washed clean, while the edges were neither washed nor even swept. I'm all for efficiency, but sweeping usually comes before mopping.

I hurried to the front door just as the officers outside rapped on it. I opened the front door to unhappy faces.

"Who are you?" the first officer, a dark haired man with mustache and sideburns. Every hair was very dark, and his eyes were like coal.

"Bo Fexler. I'm a licensed private investigator," I answered.

"Not from around here, are you?" the second man asked. His partner headed for Alan's body. The second man's nametag read Balten. He smiled at me under a sand colored mustache.

"No."

"What brought you here?"

"The dead girl in the bedroom." The other officer looked at me, then went looking for Jess. He radioed the information in as I explained, "I didn't know she was dead. Looks like maybe she overdosed."

"What about the smell?" Balten asked. I arched one eyebrow. "Almost knocked me off my feet when we came in here. You been in here with it, poking around."

"Still work to be done, smell or not."

"Well," he said, as if he didn't want to say 'wow.' He attempted to suppress a smile. When that didn't work, he asked, "Did you find anything?"

I took him to the kitchen to explain what I found. As I finished, the second officer stepped into the room. I was able to read that his name was Liputt.

"That doesn't mean anything," he denounced over the end of my observation.

"Perhaps not," I answered.

Liputt asked Balten, "You got a statement from her?"

"Yeah."

"Then," Liputt addressed me, "you don't need to be here."

"That's fine. I can find other people to talk to. Jess and Alan don't say much."

Balten smiled crookedly at my joke, then hid it again when Liputt's scowl moved from me to Balten. I offered a card and a hand to Balten, but only a nod to Liputt. Back outside, I drew in a long clean breath. In my gentle search of the trailer, I'd found paycheck stubs from a local grocery store in Jess's name.

* * * * *

Coworkers Dave, Lee, Jackie, and Sam didn't have much to offer on the woman they'd worked with. Lee was able to tell me that she knew Jess used heroin. Jess's manager, Kate, confirmed that Jess had pretty good attendance for her twenty-hour a week position.

"Until recently," Kate added. She led me back to the little smoking break room tucked into the rear corner of the store. "The first day she missed was last Tuesday. She usually called when she wasn't going to be in. Course, between us, when she'd call in, half the time, she sounded wasted."

"Makes sense."

"Oh?"

"She was a heroin user."

"Oh." Kate lit up her cigarette, took a short drag, then rolled the end in the ashtray. "I never really had any problems with her. I don't always get the best workers, you know. Not at the money we pay. Shoot, a kid like Jess could go down the road and get a job at McDonald's for more than we pay. And usually more hours. Most of the kids around here at least go into Cadillac for jobs."

I leaned back in my chair and offered a small nod and a smaller smile for her to continue.

After another drag, she did.

"So. I didn't hear anything about her using any drugs or anything. She didn't say anything to me. She did what she was supposed to. Wasn't the fastest worker, but she did the job. I'm not sure what you want to know about her."

I tipped the hand I had resting on the table in an approximation of the open-handed *whatever* gesture.

"Well. Let me think." Kate drew on the cigarette, tapped the ash, drew again, then continued. "She was living with her boyfriend. Said they'd moved up here. Said it was cheaper to live here than anywhere they could have found closer to home."

"Yeah."

"I only met him once. He looked sick. Had a nasty scar running up his forearm. I mean, nasty. Huge scar. Sometimes, when I'd work with Jess, I'd try to talk to her. Asked her about him. Asked if they, you know, had any plans for marriage. Or if they had any plans for their future at all. I remember she got real quiet. She said she didn't think there was much future with him. But she knew she couldn't go back home. I asked if she wanted to leave him. She-- I don't think she answered."

"Did she think that her family would prevent her from going back home or her boyfriend?"

"I don't think he beat her or anything like that," Kate responded quickly.

"No?"

"No. I never saw anything. And she didn't act like . . . like a battered woman. I've had a few work her over the years. A couple who needed the job because they'd just gotten out. One who was still getting beat. My point is, Jess didn't seem that way. She didn't seem scared. She didn't seem to, to be down on herself."

"Did she speak of any friends around here?"

"No."

"I haven't found anyone working here who was terribly close to her."

Kate shook her head. "No. She didn't really talk to anyone. Kept to herself." She snuffed her cigarette in the ashtray, but continued to roll it between thumb and forefinger.

"Did you call her at home or anything when she didn't show up for work?"

Kate frowned, shook her head. "Don't usually do that around here. People come and go. No one hardly ever gives their two week notice in retail. And I didn't really have a personal relationship with Jess like I've had with others."

"Thanks. If you hear anything else, give me a call," I requested with a card.

I wound my way back to the sales floor, found a pop cooler and purchased a cold bottle of diet Pepsi.

* * * * *

I figured correctly that the police would still be working at Jess and Alan's trailer. The bodies had been removed to a pair of waiting ambulances, but not driven away. I found Balten and asked to see Alan.

Balten pulled open the ambulance door for me to climb in. He handed me a pair of gloves. Putting one glove on, I turned Alan's forearm. Seeing nothing, I reached across and checked the other arm.

Balten kept pressing me for answers, but I just fed him "I don't know." He followed me to the road where I could get a signal again, and stood by me while I dialed up Mrs. Raina Stihles.

She was out of breath when she finally answered on the fourth ring. I heard an answering machine click on and beep off as Raina wheezed, "Hello?"

"This is Bo, the private eye from earlier."

"What do you want now?" she snarled.

"Does Alan have a scar on his arm?"

"Alan? No. His brother David does though."

"Where could I find David?"

"Hell if I know. He disappears on me. Just comes home to get beer or money or spend the night."

"How long has he been gone this time?"

"I dunno. Since last Monday, maybe. Coulda been Sunday."

"Did David get along with Alan?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"What about Jess?"

"Yeah. He liked her."

There was a voice in the background that preceded Raina putting a hand over the phone and partaking in a muffled conversation. Then, she reported, "Guess David said Alan shoulda treated Jess better. Or something like that. She didn't have to stay with him."

"You said he had trouble with a girl breaking up with him."

"Well, he'd get pretty mad for a while. I don't think he would really hurt anyone."

"All right. Thank you." I didn't know what else to say, so I just hung up.

"Well?" Balten prompted.

"That's not Alan. It's his brother David."

"Well, then maybe the girl didn't kill the boyfriend."

"Probably not."

"You thinking Alan did it."

"Yeah."

"Me too. So. Then where's Alan?"

"Good question. Did you check on the truck?"

"Registered in Jess's name."

"Any vehicles registered under Alan's name?"

"Didn't check."

"Check David's while you're at it."

"Oh?" he smiled at my instruction, amused bordering on patronizing.

"Did the man have any ID on him?"

"No. We didn't find any ID for him inside anywhere, either. Her purse was there, though," he added. "No money in it. You look like your thinking something."

I blinked, focused my sight on him, then shook my head.

"Nothing that I could currently articulate."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Wow. That's not what I expected you to say."

"I can't much help that. If you don't need anything from me, I'm gonna go."

He nodded, shook his head, then verbalized, "Go 'head." Wetting his lips, he hesitantly asked, "Maybe we could meet up for dinner, though?"

"I have to work tonight."

"Oh. Right. Maybe another time."

He missed the obvious-- I was in town to work on the very case that he should be investigating. I didn't fault him for being distracted by the pretty investigator. I just gave him a little wave before backing down the driveway and driving away.

All I was hired to do was find Jess. And I had done that. But it was like walking away from a puzzle without putting the last dozen pieces into their places in the center. Especially since I had a hunch as to where Alan would be staying.

I drove down the road, parked under a towering pine tree, and walked up to the door. When I knocked, I heard scuffling and hurried movement. Then, nothing.

I knocked again.

"Alan!"

He pretended he couldn't hear me.

"Alan, let me in. I know you're in there. I also know what happened to Jess and David."

Only the pines answered.

"Don't make me draw Lou into this. You know what he's done for you, whether he realizes it or not."

I smoked a cigarette to give him a measured amount of time before heading off to talk to Lou.

"Hey, me again," I said with a big, friendly grin.

"Oh. How are you today?"

"Good, good. Look, I need the key for the end cabin. Just for a few minutes."

"Oh. Problem out there?"

"Yeah. Alan needed some help with something."

"Alan? Is he here today? He didn't sign in," Lou added.

"I'll remind him to do that."

Lou nodded.

"The key?"

"Oh, sure." The old man handed me the key and smiled.

"You look prettier everyday," he added.

I felt a jolt of guilt. It's a lot easier on the conscience to manipulate those who have done wrong. But, key in hand, I jogged back to the end cabin.

For a moment, I thought Alan might have made a break for it, and picked up my pace. Lungs damaged from smoking cut that little run short and I wheezed the rest of the way. Should have maintained the jog. I slid the key into the lock, turned, and opened surprisingly quiet hinges.

Alan turned to me, then sat on the bed, hands in his lap.

I shut the door behind me, hooked my thumbs on my jeans pocket, and looked at him. Alan's shoulders were bent, hiding much of his thin, creased face from me.

I was going to ask him what happened to Jess and David, but Alan spoke first. His words were raspy, almost as if his voice had been overused recently.

"I didn't kill her. I know it looks that way. And, yeah, I did buy her H, but I didn't kill her. Why would I?"

"Because she was going to leave."

"What? She never said anything to me. The only thing she said to me is that sometimes, she wished she could give up the drugs. She didn't think she had a future."

"Certainly not with you."

His forehead lowered, darkening his eyes.

"Who are you?"

"Bo Fexler. I'm a private investigator."

"What?"

"Abby hired me."

"Jess's sister?"

"Yes."

"Didn't think anybody cared about us," Alan whispered.

"I'm not sure they do."

"Thanks!"

I had enough sympathy to shrug one shoulder.

"What about David?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Oh really."

"Look, I came home Monday night and--"

"Came home from where?"

He looked away, but honestly reported, "From buying H."

"Okay. You got home and...?"

"I found David on the floor and Jess in the bedroom. Both of them were dead."

"What did you figure had happened?"

"That David and Jess had a fight."

I stared levelly at him.

"They didn't get along real well. Not sure what they fought about. Too blitzed at the time." He offered a wry smile. "Since I've been hiding out here, this is the longest I've been sober."

"You know what the scene looks like? It looks like you killed David and Jess before hiding out here."

"I didn't kill her."

"She overdosed."

"Yeah."

"Used up the last of H before you got home with the new batch?"

He shifted, the weight of the lie making him physically uncomfortable.

"I guess."

"Why didn't you call the cops?"

"I was trashed."

"You got the heroin, drove home . . . trashed . . . to find your girlfriend and brother dead."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Why's the trailer wrecked?"

"I don't know."

"Why should I believe anything you're telling me?"

"I'm sober. First time in a long time I've been really sober. I've been out here almost two weeks. It's been hell, but it's also given me a lot of time to think."

"So, then, what happened to the heroin you brought home Monday night?"

"Gone."

I shook my head. "Then how have you been clean for two weeks?"

He shifted again, unlaced his fingers so he could work the tension from them. "I didn't buy much. Used it that night."

"You're a liar. You know, I'm starting to understand why people don't miss you much."

He frowned over a clenched jaw.

"Really. They can all go to hell, and you right along with them."

He moved towards me, hands out.

I knocked one hand away and sidestepped his advance, but he managed to grab my sleeve. He used that tenuous hold to keep me near enough for him to seize my arm at the elbow. His fingers dug into the joint between bones.

I provided stiff resistance, turning with the movement every time he tried to twist my arm behind my back. Then, one of his hands clasped my throat, imperiling my air supply. He twisted my arm again and trying to pull away only got me choked. My shoulder twinged with the pain of tendon yanked too far. I bent, gritted my teeth, and was choked again. He released my neck so he could grab my other arm. With the leverage of the twisted right, he drove me towards the bed.

"Get on the bed," he rasped.

I knelt on it, facing the wall.

To remind me of the power he had, he wrenched my arm again. I grimaced.

There was a belt coiled atop the small chest of drawers. Alan used this to bind my hands. Then he had me lay face down on the mattress. The smell was rank-- dusty, moldy urine. And other odors of origins I didn't want to contemplate. I turned my head enough to watch him move in the small space. His feet were surprisingly quiet on the old wood floors.

"Why'd you do it?" I asked, voice muffled by the bedding.

"Do what?"

"Kill David?"

"You're so damn sure about that, aren't you?" he exploded. "I didn't kill him."

"Fine. Why was he there?"

"He's my brother."

"Oh, is that why he looks kind of like you. Never would have guessed that."

He backhanded the side of my head. "I don't think I like you."

"I think your high's wearing off."

That got me another slap.

"Why was he visiting you that particular evening?"

"Came up to see me. He said he was worried about me."

"Did he know you'd be out-- running errands?"

"I don't think so."

"So he thought you might be there when he arrived."

"Yeah."

"Where's David's car?"

Panic distorted his face, leaving his mouth agape.

"What?"

"Where's his car? It's not at your place anymore."

"I don't know."

"You moved it. Left it someplace, so people wouldn't realize that David was missing. I'd bet ten bucks that you have his wallet and ID. And you two look similar enough that you could pass yourself off as David. But only to people who didn't know about his scar. The problem here, Alan, is that you've done everything a murderer would do after knocking off his victims. It's far too planned. You took the wallet, moved the car, hid out here."

He licked his lips and his breathing got heavier.

"Jess saw no future in you. And you knew that. All she saw you as was a source of heroin. David didn't come by to see you; he came by to check on Jess. Maybe they were lovers. He was outraged when Jess died. She really did OD, didn't she?"

He swallowed hard.

"Just took too much. Cause of the tolerance a junkie gets. You and David fought over it. That's why the trailer's trashed. At least, in the living room. Neither of you wanted to go in to the bedroom, because that's where Jess was. I suspect that one of you tried to call a truce-- my money's on David. I think that's when he was going to order some pizza. The flyer was still in his hand. You hit him. Probably with the big cast iron pan. He bled a lot on the kitchen floor, which you did a real good half-assed job cleaning."

"So, tell me, since you got his figured out," Alan put in, making sure to add plenty of last ditch bravado, "why's David laying in the living room?"

"Because he crawled there. To get away from you? Or maybe to get to the phone. I'm not sure. I don't pretend to have all the answers."

Alan's hands were shaking dreadfully as he fussed with something on the dresser. He lit a candle. And started to cook up some heroin. I rolled onto my side, but upon hearing the squeak of bedsprings, Alan ordered me to lie back down.

"Or what?" I demanded, feeling a little safety in the distance between us. Not that my sense of self-preservation has ever been very good.

"I'm already going to kill you, but I don't have to mess you up before I do it." He gave me a sick smile that turned my blood cold. I had trouble swallowing.

"Oh. Well, with Jess and David, this would make three."

"I didn't kill her," he maintained. "Hell, I didn't even know she was dead! I thought she'd be okay. David told me she wasn't feeling well. That-- THAT!-- was why we stayed out of the bedroom. I didn't know she was dead!"

"Then why did you kill David?"

Alan concentrated for a moment on filling the syringe. He turned to me and explained, "Because he was going to try to take her away. Take her away

from me. So she could get clean. Because, as he said, he didn't want her to die from something stupid like a heroin overdose."

I didn't ask the obvious. That was how he was planning to kill me. What I did ask was, "You were going to leave the trailer so it looked like Jess killed David. Perhaps thinking it was you. You were going to say you had gone to stay at the hotel after a fight. So, now you'll kill me and run again. Probably take my car, figuring no one will know to look for my body here."

"That's a good plan."

He took my upper arm and jabbed the needle into it as I struggled. But shock stopped me. Then, the drug started to kick in. Objects blurred into motions that didn't make sense before finally I just drifted off.

I woke with bright lights in my face that made it hard to open my eyes. Squinting against them, I recognized hospital colors, sounds, even smells. A nurse was nearby, so I whispered, "Am I gonna live?"

"Yeah. You were lucky. Your friend didn't make it," she explained.

Friend? Alan. I nodded.

When I was fully lucid, I made a call to my client.

"The police already called us about Jess," she explained. "I thought you would have."

"Hard to get a signal up here," I answered. "What else did they tell you?"

"They didn't think Alan killed Jess. They're not sure, since he did try to kill you with heroin. At least he killed himself. Saves everyone a trial."

"If there was even enough evidence to go to trial."

"Well, the cops found David's car. The only prints on the steering wheel were Alan's. They said that he must have driven it last. And they said that there was blood cleaned up in the kitchen. I think he said they tested a sponge to find that? I don't really know." She sighed. "I knew he would end up killing her somehow."

"At least now you don't have to worry about her."

"Yeah," she said absently. "Look, I gotta go. Mom's taking me and the kids to dinner."

"Don't forget to give a toast in memory of your sister."

"She did this to herself!"

"I suppose it was better than being a part of her own family. Have a nice dinner. I'll submit my report and invoice by the end of next week."

Then I called the PD, asking for Balten.

"Yeah?"

"It's Bo."

"Oh, hi. How're you feeling?"

"Irritated. How did I live when Alan didn't? I don't have any tolerance to heroin."

Balten explained, "I got there a few minutes after you. Figured out the same thing you knew. You could've told me-- you SHOULD have told me what you were up to."

"Anyway?"

"Anyway, I came in the door, spooked him I guess. He jabbed himself with the needle. He got more than a shot of heroin-- he got a bubble in his blood. It killed him. We got you to the hospital in time."

"I appreciate that. Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure. Well, depending on what it is."

"In Jess's bedroom, there was a photo on her dresser. Could I have it? I want to include it with my report."

"Sure. What's the photo?"

"It's a picture of Jess and her sister Abby. They've got their arms around each other's shoulders. Everything else in that place was broken or dirty or just trashed, but that picture in its little silver frame, was pristine. Perhaps the most important thing Jess owned. I think Abby should have it. Perhaps as a reminder."

The End

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...AND ROCK AND ROLL
by
Jochem Vandersteen

*Jochem Vandersteen has been writing all his life. With the Internet he found a chance to share his work with the rest of the world. His main influences include the old guys like Hammett and Chandler as well as wit slingers like Harlan Coben and Robert B. Parker. He's also a big fan of alternative rock and comic books, which explains a lot of the pop culture references in his work. The proprietor of the **Sons of Spade** website, Jochem somehow manages to capture the essence of the American PI ethos, despite the fact that he lives far away in the Netherlands. His Noah Milano novel **The White Knight Syndrome**, was published in 2003.*

It seemed that the legends were true. The guy at the bar seated next to me could drink like a fish. His long, gray-streaked blond hair, leather jacket and wraparound shades made my drinking buddy stand out from the crowd. The fact that he was Zakk Blakk, former frontman of legendary heavy metal band Blakk Atakk, didn't hurt either.

You'd think sitting next to this metal legend would feel like a dream come true for me. I'd been into metal and rock since my teens. Mostly, however, it was kind of embarrassing and a big disappointment. Zakk had become a parody of his former self. The ultimate rebel was now just an old guy who behaved like a kid. The rock icon who had to beat the groupies away him with a stick twenty years ago was now just a dirty old man who had to pay to get his rocks off. The years onstage had left the former guitar virtuoso deaf in one ear.

But drink?

Godalmighty, he could still drink.

He had come to LA to do some Blakk Atakk reunion tour. Most of his former band members had ended up dead, either because their hearts stopped coping with the booze and drugs or because they crashed their bikes against trees that seemed to have a habit of suddenly creeping up on them. That meant only one original band member shared the stage with the frontman. As was so often the case, it turned out to be the drummer, now a quite popular producer. The guy actually seemed to be pretty sober too.

Zakk's manager knew his boy's talent for getting into trouble, so he had decided to hire a special nanny for him. My job was to make sure Zakky Boy didn't touch any coke, didn't get any teenager pregnant, and didn't get into any

fighters – or, at least, if he did, that he could still get on stage the next day. The mix was a natural. I'd done some security the last couple of years for rock clubs, and it seemed like a good idea to him to get someone who knew the town, the clubs and could talk with his employer about rock music. That's me.

Noah Milano – Rock And Roll Detective.

“Did I tell you about that time I pissed into Rob Halford's boots?” Zakk asked me between a shot of Jack and a pull of Corona.

Our conversations were almost always this intellectual.

I took a sip of my Dr. Pepper and shook my head.

“Nope, but I have a feeling you're gonna.”

He laughed – well, more like cackled - and clapped my shoulder. I tried not to choke on my Pepper.

Zakk started his story like he was Blackbeard relating a pirate tale. *Yo ho, yo ho and a bottle of rum.*

“It was at this Dynamo festival in Holland... Ever been to Holland, kid? I'm telling you, there's more grass for the people to smoke than for the cows to fuckin' chew. And the girls... Shit, the girls... I'm telling you, the girls over there... They... They...”

His mind wandered off together with his eyes. I knew by now what made them do that, and I followed his gaze. Sure enough, two attractive young girls passed us by. One was a tall skinny blonde with a pony-tail and a pierced lip. The other was a gothic looking busty one with short dark hair.

“Hey, ladies! Want me to autograph your tits?” Zakk shouted at them.

I rolled my eyes.

“What the hell are you talking about, gramps?”

Obviously, the gothic one was the more assertive of the two.

He wobbled off his barstool and managed to get close enough to the girls to put his arms around them.

“Come on, you girls have got to know me... Zakk Blakk? Of the Black Attakk?”

When he was answered with blank stares, he continued with remarkable drive for a guy pissed out of his skull.

“Come on... We had three hit singles... *Demon Android? Love Me To the Grave?* Shit, you girls have to remember the duet I did with Lita Ford? I'm a fuckin' Metal God!”

Gothic girl slapped him in the face. “Take a hike, creep!”

Zakk stared at her like a baby who'd just gotten his candy stolen.

The bouncer, who up to that point had watched what had happened closely, decided to step in. He was a big, balding guy, bulging with the kind of muscle you don't just get from a bottle of steroids and a Gold's Gym membership. I

noticed the prison tat on his right arm. The look in his eyes was meaner than a kick in the balls.

This could go very wrong.

He had a hand on Zakk's throat. "Leave those kids alone."

"No, that was a song by Pink Floyd, not Blakk Attakk," I said.

The bouncer turned around to face me. He released his stranglehold on Zakk's neck.

"Who're you?"

"I'm his nanny. I promised to get this guy back home in one piece. So just let us leave, okay? We don't want any trouble."

He poked a finger at my chest. I hate it when they do that.

"Seems like you already found some, pretty boy."

"Jealousy is so ugly," I said.

I grabbed his finger and gave it a nice twist. I didn't let go until he was on his knees. When I did, he gave a relieved groan.

"Fuckin' awesome!" Blondie and Goth exclaimed. "Hey, man, you wanta party?"

"Yeah, and pretty painful too," I added. It's a sad world we live in when pretty young girls get excited by violence.

I grabbed Zakk by his sleeve and dragged him along.

"Let's go, pal. I think we've kind of overstayed our welcome here."

* * * * *

We were in my Dodge Challenger, cruising the Sunset Strip.

"You know, I used to own one of these babies myself, just before I got addicted to Caddies," Zakk told me.

"I didn't know you played golf."

Zakk's stared at me the way a mouse stares at a water balloon. Either he didn't get my joke or he'd just arrived at the fifth circle of inebriation. It occurred to me that perhaps I should stop him from drinking before things got really out of hand.

"Listen, pal... I got me some hankering for pussy. Could you take me to the Farm?" he asked.

"Take you where?"

I was starting to worry that bestiality was one of Zakk's secret vices. It was possible. You hear all kinds of stories. After all, the man had been known to snort cow shit back in the day.

"The Pussy Farm! Shit, how long you been living in La-La Land? The Pussy Farm! One of the best damn brothels in the Golden State."

I wasn't sure I was relieved now. But hey, a brothel was a pretty enclosed space and after all that booze he probably wouldn't even be able to get it up. How much harm could he do over there?

"All right, old man. Tell me where to go."

He made a nice set of devil horns with his hands.

"Oh yeah! Zakk Attak Pussy Time!" he yelled to passersby strolling the Walk of Fame.

Enthusiastic fella, that Zakk.

* * * * *

If the Playboy Mansion sold tickets, it would be the Pussy Farm. It was hidden near Quail Canyon, behind a big iron gate with signs that said '*Restricted Area – Access to Pussy Lovers Only*'. Any one of cars parked there cost more than I made in four years. Except mine, of course.

Inside, we were greeted in the hall by a buxom peroxide blonde in her fifties, dressed in a pink fur coat.

Classy.

"Hello boys, what can we do for you today?"

"What do you think, Zsa Zsa? You can get us some... PUSSY!" Zakk went with the devil sign again. I think in his enthusiasm he also hit the Pink Lady with some spittle.

She smiled.

"Of course. I'll ask some ladies to come in and meet you."

Then she sauntered off, wiggling her hips like a duck. All that jiggling pink made me a bit nauseated, and I hadn't been drinking at all.

I checked out the hall. On the wall were paintings of naked girls. Kind of like Playboy meets the Guggenheim. Crystal chandeliers hung from a cast plaster ceiling. The carpet was a red shaggy kind of thing. It looked as if they'd skinned Elmo for it.

In the corner of the hall was a large guy in a white suit with a buzzcut. His posture made me peg him for ex-Marine. There was a subtle bulge near his shoulder. Armed security. I was really hoping Zakk wouldn't get us into trouble again.

"Whoo-hee, buddy! Wait'll you see the beauties they got in this place. But remember, I get first dibs."

"I'll just wait here and admire the artwork while you get your exercise, Zakk. I haven't been hired to do my minding horizontal."

"Suit yourself. But I'm telling you, you don't know what you're missing. Shit, here they come now."

Indeed, beauties they were... I felt like I was in a Bond movie. Or at the Willy Wonka Babe Factory or something. They came from the stairs and lined up like they were in a beauty contest. They were dressed in tops and short skirts, bikinis, lingerie or even less. I'm a tough guy, but I almost blushed.

Blushing was not an issue for Zakk. Like a kid picking out his favorite in a toystore he grabbed a big redhead in a blue bikini by the wrist and yelled, "I want this one, I want this one!"

The redhead didn't even seem annoyed. A professional at work.

Zsa Zsa walked in again.

"Then take her with you upstairs."

And there they went. I took a moment to admire the lady's thong and the way Zakk managed to keep from falling down the stairs, as drunk as he was.

"Are you sure I can't help you with a lovely lady?" Zsa Zsa asked me.

"Pretty sure. I could do with a Dr. Pepper though."

She asked one of the lovelies to go fetch a can. A few minutes later I sat down on the stairs, sipping the drink and checking out the ladies. Just like high school.

Half an hour and another Pepper later I heard a loud scream. I immediately recognized it as Zakk's, having heard him utter a pretty good variant of it on several of his records. For a moment I wondered if Zakk had just blown his metalhead wad. That moment passed pretty quickly.

"She's dead! For fuck's sake, she's dead!" he shouted. I sprang from the step and rushed up the stairs.

He stood - naked - in the doorway of one of the second floor rooms. There was wild panic in his eyes. It reminded me of the art of his album '*Songs of Terror*'.

"What happened?" I asked.

He pointed to the room.

"She's dead. I gave her some of my stuff and she just started to foam at the mouth. I tried to help her but she just went into these freakin' convulsions. Then she stopped breathing!"

I entered the room. The redhead lay spread-eagled on the bed in her own vomit. Though she was naked and good-looking, it was not a pretty sight. I checked her pulse.

Deader than Vanilla Ice's career.

"Dammit, Zakk! I leave you alone for half an hour and you kill a damned prostitute! How's that going to look on my resume?"

I cursed myself because my first thought had been about my reputation rather than the loss of an innocent - well, relatively innocent - life.

"It was an accident, man! I didn't know it was bad stuff. I just wanted to share, you know?"

“Yeah, Mr. Rogers would be proud of you.”

“What the hell is going on here?” said the guy with the buzzcut. He peeked into the room and immediately went for the gun hidden behind his jacket.

I pushed his gun-arm, pinning him against the wall. Leaning into him with my full weight, I kept him from getting his gun out. With my other hand I drew my Glock, and pressed the end of it up against his chin.

“Relax and nobody dies,” I said. I followed his eyes into the room. “Nobody else, that is.”

“You think?” a husky voice said behind me.

I spun around, pointing the Glock at the source. It was Zsa Zsa, holding a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun.

Lovely.

Buzzcut wrenched my gun away from me and gave me a shove. I barely managed to avoid bumping into Zakk.

“Shall we just put away the guns and talk about this like civilized people?” I offered.

“You just got one of our employees killed. How civilized does that sound to you?” Buzzcut countered.

“It was an accident. My client had no malicious intent whatsoever.”

I was starting to sound like a lawyer. Getting bailed out by my own lawyer Maxwell Slim several times a year obviously was starting to have a lasting effect on me.

“Yeah, man! I was just sharing some of my coke. I just wanted her to party with me,” Zakk pleaded.

Zsa Zsa gave him a look most people reserve for things they find stuck to the bottom of their shoes.

“I’m one employee short and got one hell of a problem on that bed. How am I going to get rid of that? I can’t just call the cops! If they start snooping around here I might just as well close down the place myself.”

“I’m sure we can find a way to solve this,” I said.

Noah Milano, Rock And Roll Voice of Reason.

Zsa Zsa crossed her arms. The shotgun was now pointing at the ceiling. It still made me pretty nervous. “And how the hell do you propose to do that?”

“I’ve got a few friends with pretty good contacts. My buddy Tony will surely be able to come forward with an adequate replacement. Also, he will be able to dispose of the body.”

Tony Hawaii used to regularly take care of dead bodies and hookers for my dad. The fact that Tony was a necessity in my father's business was one of the reasons I chose another line of work.

It was sure damned nice to have him when you needed him, though.

“Hmmm. Okay, maybe... But none of that cheap Eastern-European crap. I run a high-class joint.”

I took a look at the inches of make-up on her face and the cheap boudoir furnishing.

“Oh, I can see that,” I said.

“I’m pretty rich! I can throw in some money for you as well!” Zakk piped in.

Zsa Zsa nodded.

“All right. Call that buddy of yours.”

I called Tony on my cell. After he stopped laughing at how I managed to get into stuff like this he promised to be there in an hour - with bleach, a hacksaw, plastic sheet and a high class hooker. What a pal.

I closed my cell. “It’s arranged.”

* * * * *

The hookers waved Tony goodbye as he drove off in his Cadillac, a dead colleague of theirs in the trunk. I shook hands with Zsa Zsa, who seemed pretty satisfied with the replacement Tony had come up with as well as the check Zakk had written. Buzzcut warned us to stay away from the place, as he put it, ‘*until disco comes back*’.

Zakk clapped me on the shoulder.

“Never a dull moment with me, hey buddy?”

I blinked. Then I drove my fist into his face, splitting his nose and spraying blood five feet in every direction. Leaving him on his ass in front of the whorehouse, I got into the Challenger and treated him to a mouthful of dust as I peeled out of the parking lot.

Leaving a client like that isn’t very good for your reputation as a bodyguard, but sometimes you just have to go with your instincts. I headed for a church to light a candle for the dead working girl. Nobody else seemed to care a hell of a lot for her, so I supposed I had to.

It’s all just part of being a Rock And Roll Detective.

The End

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VENGEANCE IS MINE: THE FOLSOM CASE

by

Gay Toltl Kinman

*GayToltl Kinman is a three-time Agatha Award Nominee (strange to see one of those in The Back Alley!), an Eppie Award Winner and a Derringer Award Nominee. She has published short stories in **HandHeld Crime, Shots, Detective Mystery Stories, Futures, Crime and Suspense, and Mystical-E.** She has a Masters in Library Science, and a Juris Doctor, which makes her one mean lawyer in the stacks!*

How's your hand?" Lara Chisolm asked.

"Hurts like hell. How can two fingers that are missing still hurt this much?" said Angie Shay. "Never mind, that's a rhetorical question."

Her blond hair swung around her ears as she shook her head.

"You said you had some wine chilling?" Lara opened the refrigerator.

"White zinfandel," Angie said as Lara pulled the wine out. "Opener's in that drawer,"

Angie pointed with her left hand, her bandaged right still rested on her kitchen table.

"Get the good glasses. They're in the dining room cabinet. The pink ones. To match the wine. They were my grandmother's."

Lara set the opened bottle on the table, then returned with two long-stemmed, antique crystal glasses.

"These are beauts," she said, holding one up to the light, turning it and looking through the rosebud pink glass. Then she set them on the table. She held one by the base and gently flicked a finger on it. It rang musically.

"Real crystal," she said as she poured the wine.

They clinked glasses.

"Good thing I'm a lefty, " Angie said looking at the wine glass she held with her good hand. "Now what did you want to talk to me about?"

"I've got an idea," Lara said. "I want us to open a P. I. Agency and call it *Vengeance is Mine.*"

"As in, "sayeth the Lord?"

Lara touched her glass again to Angie's, "You got it, partner."

"We have to have some rules, this could go over the edge."

"Just happened to have paper here." Lara reached down into her briefcase, past her gun and her LAPD badge and pulled out the yellow pad. She brushed

dark brown curly bangs that made her forehead itch in the July heat. She felt them instantly spring back.

"You're serious," Angie said, leaning back in her chair.

"Dead. Serious."

"What happened today? You were testifying in court, weren't you? Don't tell me. That slimeball got off."

"You got it in one." Lara drained her glass and poured another. "The scuzzy walked. I won't even tell you the details. I'm thinking of walking, too."

"Why, Lara? You've got ten years on."

"So do you."

Angie waved her bandaged hand, then flinched and set it gently back on the table. "I can't be a cop if I'm missing two fingers. I mean, not a real cop. Doesn't matter that I got shot in the line of duty."

"Thank God, you're a lefty because that's one scuzzy off the streets permanently."

"Amen to that."

"I didn't hear that they were making you pull the pin," Lara said.

"Might just as well. The Chief said I could have any desk job in the Department that I wanted. Even in his office."

"Ah, I get it. The operative words are *desk job*."

"Lara, I don't want to sit behind a desk. It would break my heart. Reading reports of what everyone out in the field is doing. I'm not going to catch any bad guys sitting at a desk. I'm ready, willing and able to hop back into our plain jane car at this very minute. I'm a street cop, and an Investigator. I'm not a desk jockey."

"Okay, okay, I get it."

"But you're still an Investigator. No one's making you take a desk job so why do you want to leave?"

"Think I lost something when you lost your two fingers, and especially now that I've lost you as my partner," Lara said.

Angie finished her wine. "You'll get another partner. A good one."

"Maybe," Lara filled Angie's glass.

"Let's do this," Angie said, "Work our first case or two, then you can decide if you still want to quit."

Lara played with the pen on the yellow pad. "I'll made a deal with you. If you stay, so will I. You can be a desk jock for LAPD, and an Investigator for V.I.M."

Angie laughed. Lara felt a weight off her chest that her friend and partner found a moment of merriment in her pain-filled week

"Clue me in about the business you've got in mind. I can tell you've been thinking about this a lot."

Lara nodded. "Basically what we're doing, only we work one case at a time not a file drawer full. I want us to be the resort for lost cases. I want us to balance the scales of justice when the police and courts aren't able to."

"Can't say a few people wouldn't welcome it," said Angie.

"Clem, Don and Racine said they'd come in with us. Part-time. They don't want to give up their day job."

"Whoa. You've already talked to them about this?"

"Been talking to them ever since you got hit. How to get the scuzzies off the street. They started telling me about all the cases where the victims' families wanted justice. And had no place to go. That's what gave me the idea."

"I see," said Angie. She poured the wine this time, emptying the bottle. "We've got to think this out, make strict rules, otherwise you're talking vigilantism."

"I want us to offer a thorough investigation, so we're sure we've got the right culprit. One hundred percent sure. If we're not, we walk away, give the client back the money. But we've got to charge a high fee. I'm talking really high. Our investigations will be more thorough than any police agency has time for."

"I like it," said Angie. "You're making me feel better already. Let's start writing up the rules."

Lara nodded. She looked at the empty wine bottle, picked it up and dumped it in the trash. "Thought I saw another one in there," she said as she opened the refrigerator again. "Ah, there you are, you can't escape."

"We'd better make those rules fast before we finish the second bottle."

So they did.

Toward midnight, *Vengeance is Mine* was born.

* * * * *

"You understand our rules, Mr. Folsom," said Lara.

"I know the rules," he said.

"Here is our contract and if you agree to the terms, then please sign."

Lara looked at the man as he wrote his name, his head was bent and she could see that his hair was thinning on top. Strike that. Thinned. The bones of his skull were hardly contained by the skin. When he faced her, there was a basset-hound look around his eyes. Justifiably so.

"*Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.*" Mr. Folsom read aloud from the sign on the wall as he pushed the contract and check toward her.

Lara nodded. "Someone has to help Him out."

Mr. Folsom pulled files from his briefcase. "Here are the police report, our statements, and my notes per your sheet of instructions. You already have the file boxes from the trial."

They shook hands. He hesitated for a moment as though he wanted to say something else. Then he left.

Lara went over the documents.

His daughter, Jeannie Folsom had a boyfriend, Kith Malpassant, who took her out to the desert, hacked her arms off with an axe and left her to die. She'd survived long enough to be rescued and to ID him.

Court trial, good lawyer, bad prosecutor, and he was out on the streets.

Lara guessed that Folsom's story would check out every which way and that the defendant was the real culprit. Still, they would do a thorough investigation to be sure he was.

The next item of business was to find Kith Malpassant. No surprise that he didn't conveniently leave a forwarding address when he was released from jail. But Angie would find him.

Jeannie Folsom had been a nice girl, cheerleader, and candy-striper who had just graduated from high school. Kith had been a year ahead of her in the same school.

* * * * *

"Okay, where are you with the arm hacker?" said Lara. They were seated at the small conference table in their office; the surface piled high with files and papers.

"His M.O. helped, not that he's done this to anyone else, but the pattern of his violence escalated with Jeannie Folsom. He's mixing illegal drugs and alcohol. I mean every illegal drug you know of."

"A volatile combo."

"None of this came out at the trial, suppressed as being too prejudicial. No shit."

"You found him?" Lara asked.

"You can read this guy like a map. He moved from Lancaster to Bakersfield, two desert towns. He's singing and playing the guitar in a Country-Western bar there, same as he did in Lancaster. No day job. He's got gals eating out of his hand, probably even giving him money, too. No wonder, he's got talent, nice looking, good pecs, never guess he's got sadism for brains. Yeah, I found him."

"Give me your personal take on him," Lara said.

"If I was seventeen and lived a sheltered life like Jeannie Folsom and liked country western music, yeah, I buy she went for him. Sexy guy. All veneer, as far as I can see."

"Your report says that he didn't follow the traditional pattern of the bad boy cycle of bed wetting, lighting fires, and torturing small animals.

"He's sure in that league, but he doesn't fit any of those known categories."

"His parents were older when they adopted him. Any sense that they were desperate to have a child or--"

"Got an interview here. A neighbor." Angie fingered through the file folders in her briefcase. "Yes, they were desperate to have a child, very religious, and adopted him when his parents, who belonged to their church, died in an accident. By the way, we can't blame that on him. I checked that out thoroughly. What's interesting is that Mom and Dad must have got over their desperation. He ran away at sixteen, and they didn't even file a missing person's report."

Lara laughed. "As though he'd be found. Guess they don't know the statistics on finding runaways."

"And they didn't offer to pay for his defense, let him go with a public defender."

"But they were in the courtroom," said Lara.

Angie shrugged. "Maybe they were hoping he'd be locked up for good. Got another neighbor who says he comes around occasionally. She thinks he hits them up for money."

"Were you able to interview them? There's not much in the court trial file."

"They're about as tight-lipped as you can get. They talked to me but didn't say anything. They might be worried about retaliation but my sense is they can't stand him, realized they made a big mistake in adopting him, and maybe list him as one of their sins in not being able to raise him Christian-like. What do you have?"

"Don, Clem and Racine's interviews and investigation pretty much tally up to the same thing. Even though his juvenile records are sealed, neighbors, schoolmates, storekeepers and a myriad of other people they've interviewed vented their feelings when asked about Kith Malpassant. They've even got one guy calling him King Sociopath. "

"Why should we be surprised," said Angie. "Look at what he did to Jeannie Folsom."

"With all the other investigation we've done, looks like this case is wrapping up nicely. I'll plan a V.I.M., set a date and let the guys know." Lara made notes in the case file.

"We've got two more cases?" said Angie.

Lara filled her in. "The Monroe case. Miss Ella Monroe claims her father was killed by his new wife. It's the old story, her father had money and his wife, Ella's mother had just died, so he was ripe for the pickings, she says. How did the new wife kill him? She doesn't know. Just that the new Mrs. Monroe did somehow, she is sure."

"So we'd be starting from scratch on that one? If there's been a murder committed, then whatever we find out we turn over to the D.A. for her to file charges. Give the culprit their day in court."

Lara nodded. "The second one is the Chu case. Mrs. Chu's daughter was killed by her abusive husband. He was acquitted in a criminal trial but skewered in a civil trial."

Lara saw the grim look in Angie's eyes. Angie had firsthand knowledge of an abusive husband, one of the reasons she became a police officer.

"Let's wrap up the Folsom case first, then we'll do the Monroe and the Chu cases. I don't want to spread us too thin." Lara said.

"Is that all we have on our plates right now?"

"I've got two more referrals. One from a sheriff and one from an attorney. I've scheduled appointments for the victims' families."

"What I'd love to do," she told Angie, "is to put the arm hacker, the murderer of the father / husband, and the batterer into one room and give them the "survivor" test. The person who comes out alive is the winner."

"Nope," Angie said. "We've got to follow the rules. The ones we made out originally. It's all about choices. The choices people make in life. One instant the guy is keeping the laws, then the next instant he makes a choice and he's on the other side of the law. That's what we discussed when we came up with the rules. Too easy for us to cross over the line, be law breakers, no better than the culprit we're investigating. I don't want that. That's not what you had in mind. The culprit has to make the choices. After all, he's the one who sets the whole chain reaction in motion, the case that we're hired into."

She paused and reached for a file. "That brings me to another question. Are you ready to do this?"

Lara looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"This is our first case and we weren't going to do any vigilantism."

"You're the one who talked about choices. Aren't we giving him choices?"

"Not the choices he wants."

"You mean, one of his choices means he isn't going to be able to continue to hack other girls' arms off? He didn't give Jeannie Folsom the choices she wanted."

"Just want to make sure you're in 100%. This wasn't your idea of justice when you conceived V.I.M."

"Nor yours," said Lara. "I'm in." She held her hand up for a high five. Her left hand for Angie's left.

* * * * *

Kith Malpassant had just come back from a gig.
He went in and turned on a light. They followed.
"What! Who are you?" He backed toward the sofa.

There were five of them. She and Angie and their three colleagues, Clem, Don and Racine. They'd all put on leather and tattoos. Literally. And rode up on motorcycles. Just your friendly bikers making a neighborly visit.

He dived for the sofa and pulled out a rifle. He aimed at them and pulled the trigger. And kept pulling. They all listened to the clicks.

Then he came at them waving the butt end of the rifle, yelling, but five trained people were able to bring him down, slip plastic handcuffs on, and get him seated on the sofa within a few minutes.

Lara thought about the rifle aimed at her and how close she could have been to death if they hadn't searched the place first and took the rounds out of the rifle and the handgun in the bedroom.

Now they were standing in a half circle in front of him in the quiet and privacy of the living room of the not-so-cozy house Kith rented.

Lara had to write the report but she wasn't planning on adding any descriptors like the pile of pizza boxes and other fast food detritus littered everywhere, the smell of stale beer, rotting food, and other things she didn't even want to guess at. They should have worn gas masks.

"Who the hell are you and what do you mean by breaking in here?"

"We're private investigators," said Angie. "You're the last person we're going to interview for a case we're working on. The Folsom case."

"Hey, man, I was acquitted. you can't try me again." He waved his handcuffed fists at her.

"Actually we can. We're the court of last resort. So I need you to answer a few questions. Why did you do it?"

"I don't have to talk to you or anybody."

"In your deposition you said she kept clinging to you, wouldn't let you go. You took her for a ride and ended up in the desert. You wanted to convince her to leave you alone."

"She was stalking me. Everywhere I went she'd be there She came to the nightclub all the time. Told everyone we were engaged. It was worse than being in prison. I couldn't get away from her. She chased all the chicks away."

"According to her parents, she was home almost every night and only went to see you with her girlfriends a few times. I have those dates."

"Yeah, well, it was a lot more than a few." He glanced away and didn't look Angie in the eye anymore. He squirmed on the sofa like he had an uncomfortable seat belt on.

"But you do admit you hacked her arms off?"

"Man, she asked for it, always clinging to me. Her arms around me all the time. Always touching me. She didn't give me no choice."

"No choice," said Angie in a musing tone. "Which brings me to the reason we are here. You have three choices. That's three more than you gave Jeannie Folsom."

He sat on the maroon frayed sofa glaring at them.

"First choice is we take you out to the desert--the same spot--and hack your arms off like you did to Jeannie Folsom."

He looked at them, as though he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing.

"I don't like that one." He laughed. "What are the other choices?"

Angie dropped the rubber tubing onto the stained sofa beside him. "Second choice is pure H. You can shoot up. Be a happy camper when you go out."

Next she dropped a filled syringe in a baggie.

Don tipped the coffee table so that everything slid to the floor blending with the dirty clothes and other junk there. A cockroach scampered under the sofa.

Lara took out a bottle of Kith Malpassant's favorite liquor and poured a glass, setting them both on the table. She thought that drinking out of a glass in this house was probably a first for him.

"Your third choice is to take yourself out anyway you want," said Angie. "Now."

"You guys are all crazy," he said. "What are you anyhow?"

They said nothing.

"I guess I'll have a shot of tequila. You all oughta have some, improve your disposition, especially you chicks."

He laughed again, but there was no merriment in it. He put his hands around the neck of the bottle and offered it to Angie.

They still didn't respond.

"I don't like any of the choices. But what I want is you." He waved his glass in both hands at Angie. "Get rid of the others, and we'll party."

He inclined his head twice toward the back of the house.

No question Angie was drop dead gorgeous. Handling come-ons for her was a way of life. A little anomaly here as Lara knew he always went to the abode of his girlfriend *du jour*, never to his. In searching the house, Lara had seen the state of his bed. The mattress was as stained and oozing stuffing as the

sofa, and just as rank on the sniff scale. He was probably hoping they hadn't found the gun.

"You have one minute to decide." Angie made a show of watching the time on her large-faced watch.

He threw the tequila back in one gulp, still eyeing Angie and grinning.

Lara thought she wouldn't be surprised if Angie pulled out her ankle gun and make him eat it--his fourth choice. But she knew Angie wouldn't do that.

He poured another tequila and downed it.

Lara placed a colored Polaroid of the bloodied and armless candy-striper Jeannie Folsom on the sticky table. She wondered how many lives of other girls they were saving.

Every ten seconds Lara put down another picture adding to the row on the table. The last one was a blowup of Jeannie in the morgue, color-enhanced. Vivid enough to make even Lara feel a little queasy.

"Your minute is up," said Angie.

Clem plugged in the chain saw and turned it on.

If Kith had any blood left in his face, it was now gone., and so was the smirk.

Lara noted that at first, he had looked like Mr. Macho, then his eyes went through the spectrum ending up like a mouse facing a cobra. He didn't care what he had done, Lara discerned, but realization that he wasn't going to get away with it did. Duh! He hit himself mentally on the forehead. Lara could see it in his eyes. He had to make a choice. He couldn't not do nothing. He couldn't sweet talk his way out of this one. His eyes darted as though trying not to look at the chain saw or them, now knowing there was no joke going on.

And Lara could also tell as his eyes cased his options that one of them was not the chain saw.

The whirr of the chain saw was definitely more menacing than an axe.

"It's all about choices and consequences. You made a choice then." Angie placed down the last picture of Jeannie, her high school graduation one. "And now you get to make another choice."

Clem revved the motor of the chain saw and advanced as though ready to do the first arm.

Kith snatched the bottle and gulped the tequila. He looked up at Clem.

Clem took another step forward.

Then Kith grabbed the tubing, and tied it with the flourish of an expert holding one end with his teeth. Then he reached for the syringe, tore it out of the baggie, and drove the plunger into the popped vein.

His eyes widened as the heroin gave him the first rush, and in a few moments his eyes closed. He went comatose. Pure H will do that.

Angie scooped up the pictures. Lara picked up the bottle and the glass. Clem unplugged the motor. Don took off the handcuffs, and picked up the baggie. The only prints on the syringe and tubing were Kith's. They were all wearing gloves.

Twenty-eight minutes later they left.

Racine, the last one through the door, turned out the lights.

The Folsom case was closed.

The End

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THREE-GUN TERRY?

An analysis of Carroll John Daly's seminal crime novelette Three-Gun Terry and why Daly, the acknowledged father of hard-boiled crime fiction, has been eclipsed by Dashiell Hammett in the annals of crime fiction.

Historical Commentary
by
Bruce Stirling

BRUCE STIRLING'S poetry and prose appear in number of literary journals including **Out Of The Gutter**, and **Thieves Jargon**. His crime story "**Woman Want**" was co-winner of the 2007 Fish-Knife Award for Short Crime Fiction. He's also published fiction in **Debris**, **Eclectica**, **Pen Pricks**, **Bewildering Stories**, **Opium**, and **Sensorotica**.

1923 was a busy year. In America, Prohibition was swinging to the rhythms of jazz, a new style of music one commentator said "was the first step toward hell." That hell was what F. Scott Fitzgerald called the Jazz Age. The carnage of World War One had convinced Americans that "all Gods were dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken." It was time to rebel, to forget the past and, as the song said, "In the meantime, in between time, ain't we got fun."

1923 was a very busy year. In Europe, Hitler tried to seize Munich's city government while in Paris, Hemingway and Joyce and other expat writers were creating a revolution in literature that would come to be known as modernism. Stateside, in Manhattan, another literary revolution was taking place, not in the garrets of Greenwich Village but in a 128-page illustrated pulp fiction magazine called *The Black Mask*.

The Black Mask had been in circulation since 1920. Like all pulp magazines, *The Black Mask* was "was about three things: action, adventure, and sex, not necessarily in that order." In an era when literacy had never been higher, when the stock market was booming, when tabloid journalism was just taking off, the pulps, as they were called, were eagerly read every month. With their "provocative titles, lurid covers and racy illustrations," they were "a cradle of sensationalism."

But then in May, 1923, a story appeared in *The Black Mask* that would forever change pulp fiction and, I would argue, American culture as a whole.

That story was Carroll John Daly's crime novelette *Three-Gun Terry*. In the annals of detective fiction, *Three-Gun Terry* is indeed a first. Terry Mack, the eponymous protagonist, is, as one critic says, "the world's first wisecracking, hard-boiled private investigator, the father of ten thousand private-eyes who have gunned, slugged and wisecracked through way through ten thousand magazines, books, films and TV episodes."

With the publication of *Three-Gun Terry*, subscriptions to *The Black Mask* soared. Terry Mack was a hit. At the height of the Jazz Age, Terry Mack, a character one critic describes as a "swaggering illiterate with the emotional instability of a gun-crazed vigilante" was a piece of literary anarchy in a world in which anarchy reigned supreme. But the revolution wasn't over yet.

In October, 1923, six months after the publication of *Three-Gun Terry*, *The Black Mask* published a detective story by Peter Collinson. The title was *Arson Plus*. The hero was a nameless private-eye who worked for the Continental Detective Agency. In time, the hero of *Arson Plus* would come to be known as the Continental Operative or simply "the Op." Once again, the average Joe just couldn't get enough of this new style of private-eye, this hard-boiled dick. *Arson Plus* was so popular Peter Collinson decided he'd put his real name on subsequent stories. That name was Dashiell Hammett, a name that would, over time, relegate Carroll John Daly and *Three-Gun Terry* to the annals of literary obscurity. Therein lies the question: Whatever happened to *Three-Gun Terry*? Moreover, why has Carroll John Daly, a writer whom critics acknowledge as being the originator of an American literary icon - the hard-boiled private-eye - why has his name fallen off the map while Dashiell Hammett went on to receive all the credit for creating a new genre called hard-boiled crime fiction?

Those are the questions I will seek to answer. As I do, please remember: This is pulp fiction, the seven-by-ten inch magazines the average Joe read over his blue plate special back in 1923. And, yes, I realize that the mere mention of pulp fiction is enough to send many for the exit. Nevertheless, it's important to remember what Raymond Chandler said in his essay *Introduction to the Simple Art of Murder*:

"Pulp [fiction] never dreamed of posterity...It takes a very open mind to look beyond the gaudy covers and trashy titles and recognize the authentic power of a kind of writing that, even at it most mannered and artificial, made most of the fiction of the time taste like a cup of luke-warm consommé at a spinsterish tearoom."

* * * * *

Carroll John Daly was born in Yonkers, New York in 1889. He went to high school then to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. In May, 1923, when *The Black Mask* published *Three-Gun Terry*, he was thirty-three and living as a recluse in White Plains, a city close to New York. Why was Daly a recluse? Nobody knows. But this we do know: Rarely, if ever, did he venture into Manhattan, the setting for his stories. Once, however, Daly did make a trip into the city. When he returned home, so the story goes, he couldn't find his house. A neighbor had to point it out to him. Once, for the sake of research, Daly decided that maybe he should get to know what it was like to handle a gun. Daly, leaving his temperature-controlled home, went and bought a gun only to be arrested for carrying a concealed weapon. As one friend observed, "That was the end of Carroll John Daly's research."

Who then is Carroll John Daly? Think Walter Mitty, the James Thurber character. In life, Walter Mitty is an just average Joe. In his dreams, however, he sees himself transformed. He is a romantic hero, battling bad guys and winning the day in the good old American way. Daly even admitted that at night, when he wrote, he became Terry Mack, his alter ego. For Carroll John Daly, that real life alter ego could very well have Dashiell Hammett, for in life Hammett was everything Daly was not.

Samuel Dashiell Hammett was born in 1894. At fourteen, guided by "a rebellious temperature" he dropped out of school and went to work for the railroad. In 1915, at 21, he joined the Pinkerton Detective Agency. As a Pinkerton operative or Op, Hammett was involved "in the widest possible range of police work from "petty theft to murder."

In 1918, Hammett left Pinkerton's, joined the army and contracted influenza. Soon after he developed tuberculosis. He left the army and went back to Pinkerton's but poor health forced him to resign. In 1922, weakened by disease and in need of work, Hammett, encouraged by a friend, turned to writing. "He experimented with verse and short satiric pieces, selling one to H. L. Mencken, editor of *The Smart Set*," the same high brow "slick" magazine which "launched Fitzgerald's professional career." It was Mencken, many believe, who suggested that Hammett send work off to *The Black Mask*, a magazine Mencken had originally started yet sold. That story was *Arson Plus*.

As aspiring crime writers, Daly and Hammett couldn't have been more different. By 1923, Hammett had been around the block and then some whereas Daly rarely left home. Therein lies an intriguing irony: It wasn't Hammett but Daly who wrote *Three-Gun Terry*, a shocking crime novelette that introduced Terry Mack, the world's first hard-boiled private-eye. Terry Mack might've have been "a swaggering illiterate with the emotional instability of a gun-crazed vigilante" but back in 1923, the paying public just couldn't get enough. As one female reader said:

“Terry Mack appeals to me. If anything makes me tired, it is the milk-and-water blood of the modern hero as depicted by writers who are scared to admit that blood is red. You get me?”

Obviously, she wasn't a big Sherwood Anderson fan. Nevertheless, one fact is beyond dispute: In May, 1923, Carroll John Daly introduced a new character to the world of detective fiction. Daly is even credited with writing in 1927 the first hard-boiled crime novel, *The Snarl of the Beast*.

All this raises another question: If Daly had no experience of crime and cops, if his own shadow scared him silly, where did his stories come from? Was he such an inventive genius that he didn't need to leave home to create a new literary form that transcended the need to draw from experience? I would argue not. The inspiration for Daly's *Three-Gun Terry* did not come from an inherent artistic genius that thrived on seclusion. It came from what he'd read, specifically, late 19th century dime novels and pulp magazines. Daly's inspiration didn't come from “being broke on the edge of the Sahara” as his bio claimed. His stories came from the news stand, the library, from boyhood memories, and arguably, from the movies, for in 1923, the most popular movies were romances and westerns. The first “modern” gangster movie (*Underworld* by Josef von Sternberg) didn't appear until 1927, four years after *Three-Gun Terry* was published.

There is no third party evidence to prove what I have just asserted. Like I said Daly has been all but ignored by critics. Why? One reason might be that Daly nailed Terry Mack to a plot lifted straight out of any number of late 19th century dime novels and early cowboy movies, a plot with roots firmly planted in the captivity narrative, a genre made popular by New England Puritans. Such an assertion raises the issue of experience and how it shapes a writer's work, and who the hell am I to be taking pot shots at the origins of some guy's art? Still, if you read any number of 19th century dime novels, in particular *Deadwood Dick*, the most serialized cowboy hero after Buffalo Bill Cody, you will soon realize where Terry Mack is coming from, namely, the bedrock of the cowboy cliché, one of many such clichés which, when added up, have doomed *Three-Gun Terry* to obscurity. Yet beneath all the clichés there is a brand new man who blew the doors off the detective genre, a character whose influence is still felt today.

As a novelette, *Three-Gun Terry* is about fifteen-thousand words. The first thing you notice is the title. It establishes an important fact: This story is not about a crime, i.e., *The Case of the Mutilated Foot*, *Corpse in a Cab*, *Body on a Slab*, or where a crime took place (*Murder in the Rue Morgue*, *Murder Goes to College*). Before 1923, such title hooks were the hallmark of the detective story, circa 1870 to 1923. The title of *Three-Gun Terry*, while not the first time a

private-eye's name appears in the marquee, nevertheless reinforces what is new about *Three-Gun Terry*: This story is all about character.

Character. That is what sets hard-boiled crime fiction apart from all other genres, mystery, detective or otherwise, now and in May, 1923. Contrary to popular belief, hard-boiled crime fiction is not about crime. Instead, hard-boiled crime fiction breaks the classic detective formula, one in which a detective, through deduction, follows a series of clues to a climactic scene in which the crook gets his and justice prevails. In hard-boiled crime fiction, "crime, or the threat of a crime, [is] of secondary importance." What's important in hard-boiled crime fiction is character. Bill Pronzini in *Hard-boiled: An Anthology of Crime Fiction* describes just such a character.

"The typical hard-boiled character is often a loner, a social misfit. He has a jaundiced view of government, power and the world. If he is on the side of the angels, he likely to be a cynical idealist: he believes that society is corrupt, but he also believes in justice and will make it his business to do whatever is necessary to see that justice is done. If he walks on the other side of the mean streets, he walks them at night; he is likely a predator, as morally bankrupt as any human being can be."

"A predator as morally bankrupt as any human can be." That is Terry Mack all over. In the evolution of detective fiction, Terry Mack is considered the prototype, the original Terminator. Before Terry Mack, gumshoes such as Vidocq, Dupin, Sherlock Holmes, and Nick Carter always came down on the side of the law, their actions an extension of a civilizing process, a return to order with good conquering evil. Not so Terry Mack. The man is anarchy run amuck, his most pronounced character trait a chillingly cavalier my-ethics-are-my-own attitude stamped onto a myopic worship of gun play that sees violence as a means of solving any and all problems. In fact, Terry Mack is so addicted to gun play, he spends more time bragging about his shooting prowess than he does solving the crime, namely, the kidnapping and subsequent rescue of "a virgin."

Despite Terry Mack's love of testosterone, he was, in May, 1923 a seminal American literary moment. In the opening paragraph, Terry Mack stakes out his territory loud and clear, the first person narrator another hallmark of hard-boiled crime fiction established by *Three-Gun Terry*.

"My life is my own, and the opinions of others don't interest me; so don't form any, or if you do, keep them to yourself. If you want to sneer at my tactics, why go ahead, but do it behind the pages, you'll find that healthier. So for my line. I have a little office that says TERRY MACK, Private Investigator on the door, which means whatever you wish to think. I ain't a crook and I ain't a dick; I play the game on the level, in my own way.

Notice how the story doesn't open with a plot hook, a body or a crisis of some kind, all hallmarks of the detective story before May, 1923. Instead,

Three-Gun Terry opens with Terry Mack threatening his reader if the reader dare question Terry Mack's ethics. Sherlock Holmes would never stoop so low. But Terry Mack? Hell, he'll kill you just as soon as look at you. Therein lies the revolution: The detective story is no longer about solving a crime and seeing justice prevail. It is a question of ethics, of character.

Despite such a seminal pedigree, Terry Mack, however, still has one foot planted deep in the past, the most obvious clue to his literary origins being his arsenal. As the title illustrates, Terry Mack carries three guns. Where he hides them I have no idea. (Freudians, I'm sure, would have a field day). Nevertheless, who in the annals of American fiction struts around packing so much iron? The cowboy; more specifically, the gunfighter, the loner with a pistol riding each hip and one up the sleeve just in case. This then is the image upon which Daly has modeled Terry Mack. And the best gunfighters are, as Terry Mack tells us, "the fastest on the draw." This is not the mean streets of Manhattan. No. This is Dodge City.

Once you've got Terry Mack's armament figured out you've pretty much got the man figured out as well. Like all gunfighters, he is a rebel who follows his own moral code. The plot and the dialogue of *Three-Gun Terry* each go along way in supporting this cowboy-as-cop metaphor. First the plot.

If you've seen *Star Wars*, *The Searchers*, or *Mission Impossible III*, you know the plot of *Three-Gun Terry*. If you've read *Le Morte d'Arthur*, you know it. If you've read any Nick Carter Detective Stories or Deadwood Dick or Seth Jones dime novels you know it. As far as plots go, it is as American as apple pie. I am talking about "the captivity narrative," a New England Puritan creation, circa 1680. (The first bestseller in America was, in fact, a captivity narrative by Mary Rowlandson).

Simply put, the captivity narrative pits good (civilized god-fearing whites) against evil (godless devils called Indians) with the white guys always coming out on top. This same plot is the hook upon which *Three-Gun Terry* hangs. A virgin, straight out of the convent, is kidnapped by gangsters (Indians always travel in packs). The bad guys hustle the virgin back to their hideout (Indian camp) where the virgin (bravely resisting) is threatened with "red hot pokers" (standard implements of Indian torture) if she does not reveal "the secret formula" (that will destroy the world). By chance, Terry Mack witnesses the virgin's kidnapping, tracks the gang down, single-handedly storms the crooks in their lair, and saves the virgin. The rescued virgin worships her savior to no end but Terry Mack, in another seminal hard-boiled moment, claims he is, quote, "*off dames. They don't go well with my business.*"

Terry Mack's misogyny is another first in detective fiction. Like all future hard-boiled dicks, Terry Mack wants nothing to do with dames. All they offer is love and stability, and if Terry Mack the loner-gunfighter fears anything, it's

being tied down. Why? Because he trusts no one but himself. This is another first in *Three-Gun Terry*, the big city private-eye riding a wave of unrelenting cynicism. It is theme that will echo all down the line, in Hammett's *Arson Plus* and *The Maltese Falcon*, in Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, in James Cains' *Double Indemnity*, in Mickey Spillane's *I, The Jury*, all classics of hard-boiled crime fiction.

While these moments combined did indeed conspire to come between the average Joe and his blue plate special, it is Terry Mack's coal black core that really turned the genre's on its head.

"A fellow don't have to take a shot at me to rouse my interest; you don't have to give me a good moral reason to shoot. Show me the man, and if he's drawing on me and needs a good killing, why, I'm the boy to do it."

One line bears repeating: "You don't have to give me a good moral reason to shoot." Pretty tame stuff, especially in this day and age. But viewed from a historical perspective, Terry Mack, a private-eye in name only, has just put a bullet between the eyes of all his gumshoe forefathers. And he's just warming up.

"I ain't a crook and I ain't a dick. I play the game on the level, in my own way. I'm in the center of the triangle; between the crook, the police and the victim."

This is not James Joyce carving epiphanies or Virginia Woolf aiming for the lighthouse. What we are witnessing in Terry Mack is the birth of hard-boiled crime fiction, and hard-boiled crime fiction, it bears repeating, is a study not in crime but in character. In Terry Mack, that character is a cynical, self-serving moralist establishing a new archetype: the private-eye as judge, jury and executioner all wrapped up into one. Suspicious, alienated, cynical, gun-crazed, Terry Mack indeed has all the markings of a truly modern man. Yet, as evidenced by the plot, he still has one foot firmly rooted in the past, his cowboy twang framing his literary pedigree.

"Now the city's big, and that ain't meant for no outburst of personal wisdom. It's a fact. Sometimes things is slow and I go out looking for business."

You can almost see the straw in his hair. Yet despite the giddy up dialogue, Terry Mack is once again doing something brand new: He is looking for business. In detective fiction of the day, the crime to be solved was literally in the first paragraph. Moreover, the cops or relatives of the victim often enlisted a detective of superior sleuthing skills to see the case solved. In *Three-Gun Terry*, however, such a scenario does not start the plot rolling. Instead, Terry Mack stumbles upon "a situation," namely, the kidnapping of the virgin. Once involved, Terry Mack does something else startling new. He doesn't investigate a series of clues as was the formula. Instead, he threatens his underworld connections with blackmail if they don't cough up info about the virgin's

kidnappers. In other words, Terry Mack is using brawn over brains to solve a crime. Raymond Chandler called this threat of violence “the smell of fear.” Such a charged atmosphere is the hallmark of hard-boiled crime fiction, and Terry Mack, love him or hate him, started it all. More importantly, the private-eye, once the symbol of good, is now not only oozing menace, but he is also breaking the law to serve his own selfish needs, for Terry Mack sees in the virgin’s rescue a sizable profit to be made from her adoring uncle. Best of all, the virgin knows the police chief who, in the end, exonerates Terry Mack for blowing all the bad guys away. Terry Mack is not only “a gun-crazed vigilante,” but he’s also as lucky as an inside straight. Once again, pretty tame stuff. But remember: This is May, 1923. With Terry Mack, Carroll John Daly has just turned the detective formula on its head. Suddenly, the private-eye, the hero, the erstwhile symbol of law and order, is now an anti-hero, a predator in search of profit, a “swaggering illiterate” who will kill anyone who stands in his way. Yet despite such seminal moments, there remains something quirkily inconsistent about *Three-Gun Terry*. Case in point: Before Terry Mack witnesses the virgin’s kidnapping, he can’t find any street action.

“So it comes that things is slow. Along about one-thirty [a.m.] I start for home. I got a car but I ain’t using it. The subway is my ticket tonight.”

Sorry, but try as I might, I can’t see Terry Mack, “a swaggering illiterate with the mentality of a gun-crazed vigilante” waiting in line to buy subway tokens, especially when he’s got a car and the streets are probably dead empty, it being after midnight. But it doesn’t end there. The virgin Terry Mack rescues is from Italy, yet Terry Mack persists in calling her “senorita.” Spanish not Italian. Here’s another. Terry Mack has, of all things, a chauffeur-side-kick called “Bud.” Now, you’ve got to wonder: If Terry Mack has a chauffeur-side-kick, why is he riding the subway so late at night?

Three-Gun Terry is full of such incongruities. I call them Dalyisms. Why? Number one because craft wise this is just sloppy writing and two because a real private-eye, a Continental Op, would not have a chauffeur-side kick and, if he did have a chauffeur-side kick, he sure as hell wouldn’t be riding the subway.

It’s pretty obvious what is happening here. Daly the formula writer is remembering what Daly the reader read, and what Daly read said that a hero must have a side kick, after all, Sherlock Holmes had Watson, Nick Carter had Patsy and Scrubby, and Hawkeye had Chingachgook. That was the formula and Daly, despite creating an archetype in Terry Mack, was, at the end of the day, a formula writer. He wasn’t writing about the mean streets. He was superimposing the wild west over Manhattan, and the wild west, according to the literature of the time, was full of bad guys who kidnapped and tortured virginal senoritas. In other words, Daly was giving the public exactly what they wanted: something tried-and-true, and something new. Love him or hate him, Terry Mack is the

undisputed father of Sam Spade, Phillip Marlowe, Lew Archer, Little Caesar, Mike Hammer, Dirty Harry, Don Corleone, Rambo, the Terminator, and, I assert, today's video game in which slaughter is celebrated and death has no consequence, a particularly ugly aspect of American culture sold all over the globe by Hollywood. Modern American culture has indeed cashed in on Carroll John Daly's creation, the "swaggering illiterate" called Terry Mack, a character time has all but erased. Why? More specifically, why has Carroll John Daly, the acknowledged father of hard-boiled crime fiction, been all but forgotten while Dashiell Hammett went on to be regarded as the originator of this new American genre?

To understand why Carroll John Daly has been eclipsed by Dashiell Hammett, we must turn to the work of Hammett, a writer Dorothy Parker once said was "so hard-boiled, you could roll him on the White House lawn."

When Hammett started writing in the early twenties, one critic said:

"[Hammett] was not a writer learning about private detectives, he was a private detective learning about writing."

Reading Hammett's *Arson Plus* and later stories, particularly *The Maltese Falcon*, proves this point beyond a doubt. But first *Arson Plus*.

Arson Plus was first published in *The Black Mask* in October, 1923, six months after Daly's *Three-Gun Terry*. Being published in the same magazine so close in time you'd think that *Arson Plus* would bear some resemblance to *Three-Gun Terry*. After all, *The Black Mask* was all about money, and money meant formula writing. And yes, on the formula front, *Arson Plus* does indeed end with a shootout much like *Three-Gun Terry*. But other than that, these two seminal crime stories are worlds apart.

Like *Three-Gun Terry*, *Arson Plus* introduces a new character into the world of detective fiction: a private-eye called the Continental Op. The Op investigates an insurance company's claim that "a client torched a house." Unlike Terry Mack, the Op doesn't stumble upon "a situation." The Op, instead, is all business. From the get go, he knows exactly where he is going and, with help from the police, he moves assiduously from suspect to suspect until the arsonist gets his. By today's standards, pretty routine stuff. Hammett was definitely following the formula, definitely writing for the market. So where, you ask, is the revolution?

First off, let's look at character because, as we know, hard-boiled fiction is all about character. In *Three-Gun Terry*, Terry Mack continually lets us know that he is bad news, and proud of it. However, in *Arson Plus*, the Op does the exact opposite: He plays his cards close to his chest. He is not a braggart or a self-serving moralist who enforces his own code of ethics at the point of a gun.

We're not even sure if the Op even carries a gun. Not only that but we don't know what he looks like until half way through the story. When the Op interviews a suspect, a beautiful young seductress who has kept him waiting, the Op feels a momentary attraction only to admit:

"I was a busy middle-aged detective who was fuming over having his time wasted. I was a lot more interested in finding the bird who struck the match than I was in finding feminine beauty. But I smothered my grouch and got down to business."

A busy middle-aged detective. That's all we get. What does it imply? It implies, as Dorothy Parker says, that "Hammett [is doing] his readers the infinite courtesy of allowing them to supply descriptions and analyses for themselves." In other words, Hammett is letting us create our own image of the Op. And that image is everything Terry Mack is not. Where Terry Mack is young and gunning, the Op is older, slower. Probably smokes too much and needs a drink bad. Don't we all.

One thing is certain though: The Op's character is described by action. Terry Mack's character is also defined by action but it is more fantasy than real. Simply put, he is the same old cavalry storming the same old Indian village to save the same old virgin in the same old hail of bullets, whereas the Op, pegged to Hammett's concise prose, races us through a realistic world full of stuttering witnesses and mundane police procedure all based around, curiously enough, a victimless crime. In *Arson Plus*, we are not tagging along with the Op as we are with Terry Mack. Because the Op is nameless and faceless, *we* are the Op. We have created him in our own likeness by filling in the blanks of his character. Having done so, Hammett has allowed us to place ourselves on the frontline of a stark new realism in detective fiction.

Like Terry Mack, the Op too harbors a healthy degree of cynicism. However, Terry Mack's cynicism is what I call narcissistic cynicism. His distrust of the world seems sincere enough, yet by damning both good and bad, he is not so much commenting on the world at large but rather massaging his own romantic view of himself. Moreover, Terry Mack might be "a swaggering illiterate" who follows his own moral code but in rescuing the virgin, the symbol of good, he remains an optimist, an Arthurian knight who, underneath all the tough guy talk, believes that justice will out in the end, which is exactly what happens. Order is preserved. In other words, Terry Mack is not half as new as he seems, for at heart he still bears the stripe of our Puritan forefathers, an intolerant lot who, like Terry Mack, had their own code of justice, one in which they too stood judge, jury and executioner over what they perceived to be evil, namely, the Indian. And what did the Puritans do to the Indian? They committed genocide, for the Indian was the bad guy and the bad guy, in the Puritan mind and in Terry Mack's, had to be eliminated with extreme prejudice. In other

words, might makes right. Think “Axis of Evil.” That tidy triangulation of countries has Terry Mack splashed all over it, the president who coined the phrase not only a transplanted New England cowboy, but also, many would argue, a swaggering illiterate in his own right. As you can see, Terry Mack’s roots run long and deep.

Compared to Terry Mack, the Op’s brand of cynicism is something quite different. As far as crime goes, the Op, much like Hammett in real life, has been there done that more times than he cares to recall. In this light, he is jaded to the core. Working the mean streets has turned him into a cynic, a man who brushes beauty aside not because he hates dames but because he has seen through the game of life and, more mundanely, he has a job to do. He is not a coked-out intellectual in a deerstalker cap. He is not a cowboy packing three irons, an over-inflated ego, and a Puritan my-way-or-the-highway ethic. Instead, the Op is an everyman. He is on the side of the law not because he wants to do good but because he is being paid to do a job, to find facts and right a wrong. In his search for the truth, romance is sacrificed at the alter of expediency. Therein lies the revolution. In *Arson Plus*, the Op represents the death of romanticism in detective fiction. He is the sword rammed straight through the hearts of all the shining knights, the Vidocqs, the Sherlock Holmes, the Nick Carters, even Terry Mack himself.

In *Arson Plus*, as in all Hammett’s work, death is serious business not grounds for romantic boasting. Not so for Daly. Why did Daly pen such a cavalier approach to life and death? First off, as a formula writer, Daly knew what his audience wanted, and he delivered. However, I assert that Daly, safe within his temperature-controlled suburban home, toyed with death because, unlike Hammett, he’d never stared death, mean street death, in the face. Daly’s bio proves he had no experience of what it meant to be a working cop. In short, he lacked Hammett’s real-world perspective on what it meant to investigate a murder.

Some would argue that to judge what experiences shaped Daly’s work is pure speculation and no basis for an argument. And I would agree if we were talking about a *bona fide* reclusive genius. But there’s the rub: Daly wasn’t a genius. Far from it. At his best, he was a formula hack who, drawing on a lifetime of influences, created a character, a crude prototype other writer’s would, in time, refine and transform into the archetype. Meanwhile, *Three-Gun Terry*, burdened by its predictable plot shot from the Puritan point of view - a narrative style found in almost every late 19th century dime novel (and in any number of Hollywood films) - has failed to stand the test of time. Suffice it to say, reading Daly’s *Three-Gun Terry* and his later work is like watching reruns of *The Terminator*. Great eye candy. Not much for the mind. Such an approach did make Daly a fast buck in his time, but it did not breed great and lasting art.

Hammett, on the other hand, because he worked the streets, because he was an Op, presents us with a more realistic picture of police procedure starting with *Arson Plus*. Hammett doesn't need to tart things up with cowboy slang. He doesn't need to lean on a Puritan plot to get from A to Z. Moreover, his brand of cynicism has been forged on the frontline of experience. No big deal today, but back in 1923, the Op was a seminal breeze squeezing the last ounce of romance out of the detective genre. He was, and still is, truly hard-boiled, a popular jazz-age phrase that means "*without sentiment*." More importantly, the Op was real.

Stylistically, *Arson Plus* is so straight forward, so stripped of pretense it rivals Hemingway for clarity and simplicity. Read early Hammett and early Hemingway, and you'll wonder who influenced whom. In short, Hammett, in *Arson Plus*, reveals an aspiring writer's intuitive command of formalist elements, all of which frame a compelling new character called the Op. That, in my estimation, is one reason why Hammett has eclipsed Daly and is now regarded as the father of hard-boiled crime fiction.

But there is another more salient reason why Hammett is considered the master of hard-boiled crime fiction. While Daly's later work repeated the same cycle of plot and character clichés, Hammett was steadily evolving his craft. In time, he came to use the crime story as a vehicle through which he, as a writer, could comment on life itself. We catch an awakening of this in *Arson Plus*, a moment in which Hammett is struggling to do more than just entertain. When the Op visits the torched house, he says:

"[I] poked around in the ashes for a few minutes, not that [I] expected to find anything but because it is man's nature to poke around in ruins."

"It is man's nature to poke around in ruins." This is no longer pulp fiction. This is a writer rising above the limitations of his genre, an artist commenting, however brief, on the nature of man who, by poking around in death, might find the key to the mystery called life. All that from an aspiring writer first published in H. L. Mencken's *The Smart Set*, Mencken being the same editor who first published F. Scott Fitzgerald; Mencken, the same critic who had previously rejected stories from James Joyce's *Dubliners* and early work from Hemingway while publishing work from an unknown named Sam Hammett.

"It is man's nature to poke around in ruins." Six years later, in 1929, this same line will describe private-eye Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. Spade, like the Op, is poking around not in the ruins of a torched house but in a world of failed dreams.

Plot wise, *The Maltese Falcon* follows Sam Spade, hired by a femme fatale seeking protection from a gang of miscreants. It turns out, however, that the femme fatale and the miscreants are in cahoots as they search the world over

for a priceless statuette called the Maltese Falcon. The illusive falcon, if found, will make the gang fabulously rich. Metaphorically, the falcon is the grail story and all it implies. Yet the miscreants, like Arthur's knights, fail to find immortality. Frustrated, their dreams in ruins, the miscreants turn on each other. Therein lies the genius of Dashiell Hammett.

By analogizing the Maltese Falcon to the grail quest, Hammett is using a mythological context to comment upon the deluding nature of man's dreams, for the falcon, like the grail, will never be found. It will always remain, as Spade tells us in the end, "*The stuff dreams are made of.*" This same theme is echoed in James Joyce's *Araby*, a short story many consider one of the greatest ever written. At the end of *Araby*, the boy-hero, having failed to find love at the fair, realizes the deluding nature of his dreams thus the deluding nature of romanticism itself. Joyce brings us to this epiphany - another seminal moment in writing - by using the same mythological, grail-quest context that Hammett employs in *The Maltese Falcon*.

The Maltese Falcon is considered the masterpiece of hard-boiled crime fiction. True to form, it packs a lot of tough talk and gun play. More importantly, it focuses on character, a jaded anti-hero named Spade who comes to realize that the falcon is shielding the miscreants from a ruinous truth, the fact that life and the dreams upon which it are built, are an illusion of one's own making. Such a comment elevates *The Maltese Falcon* into the realm of existentialist inquiry, the miscreants and their quest a metaphor that asks the age-old question: What is the meaning of life?

Great literature is a study in character. Great literature transcends genre. For Hammett, that transcendence started in *Arson Plus* and was achieved in *The Maltese Falcon*. The arc of Hammett's art is clear, whereas Daly never broke free of the mold. Read any number of his later works and this will become abundantly clear. The closest Daly came to turning a phrase is this from *Three-Gun Terry*. Waiting for the bad guys, Terry Mack says:

"When I look out the window, that street is as deserted as a poetry graveyard."

A poetry graveyard. Not a poet's graveyard, mind you, but "a poetry graveyard." A place poems go to die, or so it seems.

It's easy to poke fun at Daly, too easy, but this awkward metaphor is, nevertheless, just another in a long list of Dalyisms that, when added up, conspire to defeat Daly's literary claim to fame: the creation of Terry Mack, the world's first hard-boiled private-eye.

Time indeed has been cruel to Carroll John Daly. However, the clerk at the Mysterious Bookshop in Manhattan assures me that recently many people have been asking about Carroll John Daly.

It's true.

She can't explain it.

Neither can I.

The End

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McTEAGUE

Part Two

by

FRANK NORRIS

Classic Noir

*Frank Norris was a naturalistic writer of the very late nineteenth century, who produced some of the darkest, hardest-edged prose of his day. **McTeague** is, perhaps, his best-known work, if only because it was the foundation for the infamous Erich von Stroheim silent film **Greed**. Largely inspired by the novels of Emile Zola and the scientific work of Charles Darwin, much of Norris's literary work focused on the efforts of ordinary men to conquer - or at least control - the raging beast within.*

***McTeague**, the story of an ill-fated love triangle in nineteenth century San Francisco, is still considered to be one of the great American classics, ranking up there with the works of Theodore Dreiser and William Faulkner. How great an author Norris might have become in the fullness of time we will never know, as he died in 1901, just three years after publishing **McTeague**, at the very young age of thirty-two.*

***The Back Alley** will serialize **McTeague** over seven issues, and will include articles by scholars who focus on the work of Frank Norris to help the reader understand and appreciate this very early example of naturalistically noir fiction.*

The Story So Far:

McTeague, a hulking, slow-witted former car-boy in a silver mine, has opened a sham dentist parlor on Polk Street in late nineteenth century San Francisco. Schooled only by observing an itinerant dental butcher, and some superficial

readings of 'Allen's Practical Dentist' books, he engages mostly in pulling teeth and administering gas (most likely ether or nitrous oxide). His best friend, budding socialist Marcus Schouler, introduces him to a distant cousin, Trina Sieppe. Trina has a broken tooth which needs mending. While Trina is waiting to have the tooth fixed, McTeague's housekeeper Maria Macapa sells her a lottery ticket. McTeague determines that Trina's tooth can't be saved, and he has to pull it and the one next to it and fashion replacements for them. It's an operation that takes a couple of weeks and several visits to complete. At a final session, he is forced to place her under anesthesia with gas. While she is asleep, McTeague is seized by an impulse that he fights mightily, but unsuccessfully. Yielding to what he calls his 'brute', McTeague kisses Trina forcefully. Ashamed, he returns to his work, and when Trina awakens she tells him that she 'never felt a thing'. McTeague, perhaps out of guilt, immediately- if somewhat roughly- proposes marriage to Trina. She becomes very upset, refuses his proposal, and begins to vomit.

As it happens, Marcus Schouler is also in love with Trina, a fact which McTeague knew even as he kissed her and asked her to marry him. As he lies in his dental parlor, guilt-ridden, he isn't aware that Maria Macapa is robbing him blind, taking instruments and dental gold foil to sell to a Jewish pawnbroker named Zerkow.

McTeague joins with Marcus one afternoon, while Marcus – who works as an assistant for Grannis, the dog doctor – is walking some of Grannis' 'patients'. Over a couple of beers, Marcus asks McTeague what is bothering him. After considerable persuasion, McTeague confesses that he loves Trina Sieppe. Marcus realizes that McTeague would marry Trina that very afternoon if she would have him, but Marcus does not think that he himself cares for her that much. He tells McTeague that he will 'pull out', and make way for McTeague to court Trina, in the interest of their friendship. McTeague is overcome with emotion.

To cheer his friend up, Marcus plays a trick on him. He demonstrates how he can put an entire billiards ball in his mouth. McTeague is dumbstruck. Marcus takes the ball out, and then challenges McTeague to do the same thing. He does, but the ball becomes stuck. McTeague begins to panic, until the ball comes loose of its own accord. Laughing over the joke, Marcus suggests that McTeague begin his courtship of Trina as soon as possible. In a piece of foreshadowing, Marcus points to two dogs snarling at each other through a picket fence and

says, "By damn they don't love each other. Just listen; wouldn't that make a fight if the two got together? Have to try it some day."

Chapter 5

Wednesday morning, Washington's Birthday, McTeague rose very early and shaved himself. Besides the six mournful concertina airs, the dentist knew one song. Whenever he shaved, he sung this song; never at any other time. His voice was a bellowing roar, enough to make the window sashes rattle. Just now he woke up all the lodgers in his hall with it. It was a lamentable wail:

*"No one to love, none to caress,
Left all alone in this world's wilderness."*

As he paused to strop his razor, Marcus came into his room, half-dressed, a startling phantom in red flannels.

Marcus often ran back and forth between his room and the dentist's "Parlors" in all sorts of undress. Old Miss Baker had seen him thus several times through her half-open door, as she sat in her room listening and waiting. The old dressmaker was shocked out of all expression. She was outraged, offended, pursing her lips, putting up her head. She talked of complaining to the landlady. "And Mr. Grannis right next door, too. You can understand how trying it is for both of us." She would come out in the hall after one of these apparitions, her little false curls shaking, talking loud and shrill to any one in reach of her voice.

"Well," Marcus would shout, "shut your door, then, if you don't want to see. Look out, now, here I come again. Not even a porous plaster on me this time."

On this Wednesday morning Marcus called McTeague out into the hall, to the head of the stairs that led down to the street door.

"Come and listen to Maria, Mac," said he.

Maria sat on the next to the lowest step, her chin propped by her two fists. The red-headed Polish Jew, the ragman Zerkow, stood in the doorway. He was talking eagerly.

"Now, just once more, Maria," he was saying. "Tell it to us just once more." Maria's voice came up the stairway in a monotone. Marcus and McTeague caught a phrase from time to time.

"There were more than a hundred pieces, and every one of them gold -- just that punch-bowl was worth a fortune-thick, fat, red gold."

"Get onto to that, will you?" observed Marcus. "The old skin has got her started on the plate. Ain't they a pair for you?"

"And it rang like bells, didn't it?" prompted Zerkow.

"Sweeter'n church bells, and clearer."

"Ah, sweeter'n bells. Wasn't that punch-bowl awful heavy?"

"All you could do to lift it."

"I know. Oh, I know," answered Zerkow, clawing at his lips. "Where did it all go to? Where did it go?"

Maria shook her head.

"It's gone, anyhow."

"Ah, gone, gone! Think of it! The punch-bowl gone, and the engraved ladle, and the plates and goblets. What a sight it must have been all heaped together!"

"It was a wonderful sight."

"Yes, wonderful; it must have been."

On the lower steps of that cheap flat, the Mexican woman and the red-haired Polish Jew mused long over that vanished, half-mythical gold plate.

Marcus and the dentist spent Washington's Birthday across the bay. The journey over was one long agony to McTeague. He shook with a formless, uncertain dread; a dozen times he would have turned back had not Marcus been with him. The stolid giant was as nervous as a schoolboy. He fancied that his call upon Miss Sieppe was an outrageous affront. She would freeze him with a stare; he would be shown the door, would be ejected, disgraced.

As they got off the local train at B Street station they suddenly collided with the whole tribe of Sieppes -- the mother, father, three children, and Trina -- equipped for one of their eternal picnics. They were to go to Schuetzen Park, within walking distance of the station. They were grouped about four lunch baskets. One of the children, a little boy, held a black greyhound by a rope around its neck. Trina wore a blue cloth skirt, a striped shirt waist, and a white sailor; about her round waist was a belt of imitation alligator skin.

At once Mrs. Sieppe began to talk to Marcus. He had written of their coming, but the picnic had been decided upon after the arrival of his letter. Mrs. Sieppe explained this to him. She was an immense old lady with a pink face and wonderful hair, absolutely white. The Sieppes were a German-Swiss family.

"We go to der park, Schuetzen Park, mit alle dem childern, a little eggs-kursion, eh not soh? We breathe der freshes air, a celubration, a pignic bei der seashore on. Ach, dot wull be soh gay, ah?"

"You bet it will. It'll be outa sight," cried Marcus, enthusiastic in an instant. "This is m' friend Doctor McTeague I wrote you about, Mrs. Sieppe."

"Ach, der doktor," cried Mrs. Sieppe.

McTeague was presented, shaking hands gravely as Marcus shouldered him from one to the other.

Mr. Sieppe was a little man of a military aspect, full of importance, taking himself very seriously. He was a member of a rifle team. Over his shoulder was slung a Springfield rifle, while his breast was decorated by five bronze medals.

Trina was delighted. McTeague was dumfounded. She appeared positively glad to see him.

"How do you do, Doctor McTeague," she said, smiling at him and shaking his hand. "It's nice to see you again. Look, see how fine my filling is." She lifted a corner of her lip and showed him the clumsy gold bridge.

Meanwhile, Mr. Sieppe toiled and perspired. Upon him devolved the responsibility of the excursion. He seemed to consider it a matter of vast importance, a veritable expedition.

"Owgooste!" he shouted to the little boy with the black greyhound, "you will der hound und basket number three carry. Der tervins," he added, calling to the two smallest boys, who were dressed exactly alike, "will releef one unudder mit der camp-stuhl und basket number four. Dat is comprehend, hay? When we make der start, you childern will in der advance march. Dat is your orders. But we do not start," he exclaimed, excitedly; "we remain. Ach Gott, Selina, who does not arrive."

Selina, it appeared, was a niece of Mrs. Sieppe's. They were on the point of starting without her, when she suddenly arrived, very much out of breath. She was a slender, unhealthy looking girl, who overworked herself giving lessons in hand-painting at twenty-five cents an hour. McTeague was presented. They all began to talk at once, filling the little station-house with a confusion of tongues.

"Attention!" cried Mr. Sieppe, his gold-headed cane in one hand, his Springfield in the other. "Attention! We depart." The four little boys moved off ahead; the greyhound suddenly began to bark, and tug at his leash. The others picked up their bundles.

"Vorwärts!" shouted Mr. Sieppe, waving his rifle and assuming the attitude of a lieutenant of infantry leading a charge. The party set off down the railroad track.

Mrs. Sieppe walked with her husband, who constantly left her side to shout an order up and down the line. Marcus followed with Selina. McTeague found himself with Trina at the end of the procession.

"We go off on these picnics almost every week," said Trina, by way of a beginning, "and almost every holiday, too. It is a custom."

"Yes, yes, a custom," answered McTeague, nodding; "a custom -- that's the word."

"Don't you think picnics are fine fun, Doctor McTeague?" she continued. "You take your lunch; you leave the dirty city all day; you race about in the open air, and when lunchtime comes, oh, aren't you hungry? And the woods and the grass smell so fine!"

"I don't know, Miss Sieppe," he answered, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground between the rails. "I never went on a picnic."

"Never went on a picnic?" she cried, astonished. "Oh, you'll see what fun we'll have. In the morning father and the children dig clams in the mud by the shore, an' we bake them, and -- oh, there's thousands of things to do."

"Once I went sailing on the bay," said McTeague. "It was in a tugboat; we fished off the heads. I caught three codfishes."

"I'm afraid to go out on the bay," answered Trina, shaking her head, "sailboats tip over so easy. A cousin of mine, Selina's brother, was drowned one Decoration Day. They never found his body. Can you swim, Doctor McTeague?"

"I used to at the mine."

"At the mine? Oh, yes, I remember, Marcus told me you were a miner once."

"I was a car-boy; all the car-boys used to swim in the reservoir by the ditch every Thursday evening. One of them was bit by a rattlesnake once while he was dressing. He was a Frenchman, named Andrew. He swelled up and began to twitch."

"Oh, how I hate snakes! They're so crawly and graceful -- but, just the same, I like to watch them. You know that drug store over in town that has a showcase full of live ones?"

"We killed the rattler with a cart whip."

"How far do you think you could swim? Did you ever try? D'you think you could swim a mile?"

"A mile? I don't know. I never tried. I guess I could."

"I can swim a little. Sometimes we all go out to the Crystal Baths."

"The Crystal Baths, huh? Can you swim across the tank?"

"Oh, I can swim all right as long as papa holds my chin up. Soon as he takes his hand away, down I go. Don't you hate to get water in your ears?"

"Bathing's good for you."

"If the water's too warm, it isn't. It weakens you."

Mr. Sieppe came running down the tracks, waving his cane.

"To one side," he shouted, motioning them off the track; "der drain gomes." A local passenger train was just passing B Street station, some quarter of a mile behind them. The party stood to one side to let it pass. Marcus put a nickel and two crossed pins upon the rail, and waved his hat to the passengers as the train roared past. The children shouted shrilly. When the train was gone, they all rushed to see the nickel and the crossed pins. The nickel had been jolted off, but the pins had been flattened out so that they bore a faint resemblance to opened scissors. A great contention arose among the children for the possession of these

"scissors." Mr. Sieppe was obliged to intervene. He reflected gravely. It was a matter of tremendous moment. The whole party halted, awaiting his decision.

"Attend now," he suddenly exclaimed. "It will not be soh soon. At der end of der day, ven we shall have home gecommen, den wull it pe adjudge, eh? A REward of merit to him who der bes' pehaves. It is an order. Vorwärts!"

"That was a Sacramento train," said Marcus to Selina as they started off; "it was, for a fact."

"I know a girl in Sacramento," Trina told McTeague. "She's forewoman in a glove store, and she's got consumption."

"I was in Sacramento once," observed McTeague, "nearly eight years ago."

"Is it a nice place -- as nice as San Francisco?"

"It's hot. I practised there for a while."

"I like San Francisco," said Trina, looking across the bay to where the city piled itself upon its hills.

"So do I," answered McTeague. "Do you like it better than living over here?"

"Oh, sure, I wish we lived in the city. If you want to go across for anything it takes up the whole day."

"Yes, yes, the whole day -- almost."

"Do you know many people in the city? Do you know anybody named Oelbermann? That's my uncle. He has a wholesale toy store in the Mission. They say he's awful rich."

"No, I don' know him."

"His stepdaughter wants to be a nun. Just fancy! And Mr. Oelbermann won't have it. He says it would be just like burying his child. Yes, she wants to enter the convent of the Sacred Heart. Are you a Catholic, Doctor McTeague?"

"No. No, I -- "

"Papa is a Catholic. He goes to Mass on the feast days once in a while. But mamma's Lutheran."

"The Catholics are trying to get control of the schools," observed McTeague, suddenly remembering one of Marcus's political tirades.

"That's what cousin Mark says. We are going to send the twins to the kindergarten next month."

"What's the kindergarten?"

"Oh, they teach them to make things out of straw and toothpicks -- kind of a play place to keep them off the street."

"There's one up on Sacramento Street, not far from Polk Street. I saw the sign."

"I know where. Why, Selina used to play the piano there."

"Does she play the piano?"

"Oh, you ought to hear her. She plays fine. Selina's very accomplished. She paints, too."

"I can play on the concertina."

"Oh, can you? I wish you'd brought it along. Next time you will. I hope you'll come often on our picnics. You'll see what fun we'll have."

"Fine day for a picnic, ain't it? There ain't a cloud."

"That's so," exclaimed Trina, looking up, "not a single cloud. Oh, yes; there is one, just over Telegraph Hill."

"That's smoke."

"No, it's a cloud. Smoke isn't white that way."

"'Tis a cloud."

"I knew I was right. I never say a thing unless I'm pretty sure."

"It looks like a dog's head."

"Don't it? Isn't Marcus fond of dogs?"

"He got a new dog last week -- a setter."

"Did he?"

"Yes. He and I took a lot of dogs from his hospital out for a walk to the Cliff House last Sunday, but we had to walk all the way home, because they wouldn't follow. You've been out to the Cliff House?"

"Not for a long time. We had a picnic there one Fourth of July, but it rained. Don't you love the ocean?"

"Yes -- yes, I like it pretty well."

"Oh, I'd like to go off in one of those big sailing ships. Just away, and away, and away, anywhere. They're different from a little yacht. I'd love to travel."

"Sure; so would I."

"Papa and mamma came over in a sailing ship. They were twenty-one days. Mamma's uncle used to be a sailor. He was captain of a steamer on Lake Geneva, in Switzerland."

"Halt!" shouted Mr. Siette, brandishing his rifle. They had arrived at the gates of the park. All at once McTeague turned cold. He had only a quarter in his pocket. What was he expected to do -- pay for the whole party, or for Trina and himself, or merely buy his own ticket? And even in this latter case would a quarter be enough? He lost his wits, rolling his eyes helplessly. Then it occurred to him to feign a great abstraction, pretending not to know that the time was come to pay. He looked intently up and down the tracks; perhaps a train was coming. "Here we are," cried Trina, as they came up to the rest of the party, crowded about the entrance. "Yes, yes," observed McTeague, his head in the air.

"Gi' me four bits, Mac," said Marcus, coming up. "Here's where we shall out."

"I -- I -- I only got a quarter," mumbled the dentist, miserably. He felt that he had ruined himself forever with Trina. What was the use of trying to win her?

Destiny was against him. "I only got a quarter," he stammered. He was on the point of adding that he would not go in the park. That seemed to be the only alternative.

"Oh, all right!" said Marcus, easily. "I'll pay for you, and you can square with me when we go home."

They filed into the park, Mr. Sieppe counting them off as they entered.

"Ah," said Trina, with a long breath, as she and McTeague pushed through the wicket, "here we are once more, Doctor." She had not appeared to notice McTeague's embarrassment. The difficulty had been tided over somehow. Once more McTeague felt himself saved.

"To der beach!" shouted Mr. Sieppe. They had checked their baskets at the peanut stand. The whole party trooped down to the seashore. The greyhound was turned loose. The children raced on ahead.

From one of the larger parcels Mrs. Sieppe had drawn forth a small tin steamboat -- August's birthday present -- a gaudy little toy which could be steamed up and navigated by means of an alcohol lamp. Her trial trip was to be made this morning.

"Gi' me it, gi' me it," shouted August, dancing around his father.

"Not soh, not soh," cried Mr. Sieppe, bearing it aloft. "I must first der eggsperimunt make."

"No, no!" wailed August. "I want to play with ut."

"Obey!" thundered Mr. Sieppe. August subsided. A little jetty ran part of the way into the water. Here, after a careful study of the directions printed on the cover of the box, Mr. Sieppe began to fire the little boat.

"I want to put ut in the wa-ater," cried August.

"Stand back!" shouted his parent. "You do not know so well as me; dere is dandger. Mitout attention he will eggsplode."

"I want to play with ut," protested August, beginning to cry.

"Ach, soh; you cry, bube!" vociferated Mr. Sieppe. "Mommer," addressing Mrs. Sieppe, "he will soh soon be ge-whipt, eh?"

"I want my boa-wut," screamed August, dancing.

"Silence!" roared Mr. Sieppe. The little boat began to hiss and smoke.

"Soh," observed the father, "he gommence. Attention! I put him in der water." He was very excited. The perspiration dripped from the back of his neck. The little boat was launched. It hissed more furiously than ever. Clouds of steam rolled from it, but it refused to move.

"You don't know how she wo-rks," sobbed August.

"I know more soh mudge as der grossest liddle fool as you," cried Mr. Sieppe, fiercely, his face purple.

"You must give it sh -- shove!" exclaimed the boy.

"Den he eggsplode, idiot!" shouted his father. All at once the boiler of the steamer blew up with a sharp crack. The little tin toy turned over and sank out of sight before any one could interfere.

"Ah -- h! Yah! Yah!" yelled August. "It's go-one!"

Instantly Mr. Sieppe boxed his ears. There was a lamentable scene. August rent the air with his outcries; his father shook him till his boots danced on the jetty, shouting into his face:

"Ach, idiot! Ach, imbecile! Ach, miserable! I tol' you he eggsplode. Stop your cry. Stop! It is an order. Do you wish I drow you in der water, eh? Speak. Silence, bube! Mommer, where ist mein stick? He will der grossest whippun ever of his life receive."

Little by little the boy subsided, swallowing his sobs, knuckling his eyes, gazing ruefully at the spot where the boat had sunk. "Dot is better soh," commented Mr. Sieppe, finally releasing him. "Next dime berhaps you will your fat'er better pelief. Now, no more. We will der glams ge-dig, Mommer, a fire. Ach, himmel! we have der pfeffer forgotten."

The work of clam digging began at once, the little boys taking off their shoes and stockings. At first August refused to be comforted, and it was not until his father drove him into the water with his gold-headed cane that he consented to join the others.

What a day that was for McTeague! What a never-to-be-forgotten day! He was with Trina constantly. They laughed together -- she demurely, her lips closed tight, her little chin thrust out, her small pale nose, with its adorable little freckles, wrinkling; he roared with all the force of his lungs, his enormous mouth distended, striking sledge-hammer blows upon his knee with his clenched fist.

The lunch was delicious. Trina and her mother made a clam chowder that melted in one's mouth. The lunch baskets were emptied. The party were fully two hours eating. There were huge loaves of rye bread full of grains of chickweed. There were weiner-wurst and frankfurter sausages. There was unsalted butter. There were pretzels. There was cold underdone chicken, which one ate in slices, plastered with a wonderful kind of mustard that did not sting. There were dried apples, that gave Mr. Sieppe the hiccoughs. There were a dozen bottles of beer, and, last of all, a crowning achievement, a marvellous Gotha truffle. After lunch came tobacco. Stuffed to the eyes, McTeague drowsed over his pipe, prone on his back in the sun, while Trina, Mrs. Sieppe, and Selina washed the dishes. In the afternoon Mr. Sieppe disappeared. They heard the reports of his rifle on the range. The others swarmed over the park, now around the swings, now in the Casino, now in the museum, now invading the merry-go-round.

At half-past five o'clock Mr. Sieppe marshalled the party together. It was time to return home.

The family insisted that Marcus and McTeague should take supper with them at their home and should stay over night. Mrs. Sieppe argued they could get no decent supper if they went back to the city at that hour; that they could catch an early morning boat and reach their business in good time. The two friends accepted.

The Sieppes lived in a little box of a house at the foot of B Street, the first house to the right as one went up from the station. It was two stories high, with a funny red mansard roof of oval slates. The interior was cut up into innumerable tiny rooms, some of them so small as to be hardly better than sleeping closets. In the back yard was a contrivance for pumping water from the cistern that interested McTeague at once. It was a dog-wheel, a huge revolving box in which the unhappy black greyhound spent most of his waking hours. It was his kennel; he slept in it. From time to time during the day Mrs. Sieppe appeared on the back doorstep, crying shrilly, "Hoop, hoop!" She threw lumps of coal at him, waking him to his work.

They were all very tired, and went to bed early. After great discussion it was decided that Marcus would sleep upon the lounge in the front parlor. Trina would sleep with August, giving up her room to McTeague. Selina went to her home, a block or so above the Sieppes's. At nine o'clock Mr. Sieppe showed McTeague to his room and left him to himself with a newly lighted candle.

For a long time after Mr. Sieppe had gone McTeague stood motionless in the middle of the room, his elbows pressed close to his sides, looking obliquely from the corners of his eyes. He hardly dared to move. He was in Trina's room.

It was an ordinary little room. A clean white matting was on the floor; gray paper, spotted with pink and green flowers, covered the walls. In one corner, under a white netting, was a little bed, the woodwork gayly painted with knots of bright flowers. Near it, against the wall, was a black walnut bureau. A work-table with spiral legs stood by the window, which was hung with a green and gold window curtain. Opposite the window the closet door stood ajar, while in the corner across from the bed was a tiny washstand with two clean towels.

And that was all. But it was Trina's room. McTeague was in his lady's bower; it seemed to him a little nest, intimate, discreet. He felt hideously out of place. He was an intruder; he, with his enormous feet, his colossal bones, his crude, brutal gestures. The mere weight of his limbs, he was sure, would crush the little bed-stead like an eggshell.

Then, as this first sensation wore off, he began to feel the charm of the little chamber. It was as though Trina were close by, but invisible. McTeague felt all the delight of her presence without the embarrassment that usually accompanied it. He was near to her -- nearer than he had ever been before. He saw into her

daily life, her little ways and manners, her habits, her very thoughts. And was there not in the air of that room a certain faint perfume that he knew, that recalled her to his mind with marvellous vividness?

As he put the candle down upon the bureau he saw her hair-brush lying there. Instantly he picked it up, and, without knowing why, held it to his face. With what a delicious odor was it redolent! That heavy, enervating odor of her hair -- her wonderful, royal hair! The smell of that little hairbrush was talismanic. He had but to close his eyes to see her as distinctly as in a mirror. He saw her tiny, round figure, dressed all in black -- for, curiously enough, it was his very first impression of Trina that came back to him now -- not the Trina of the later occasions, not the Trina of the blue cloth skirt and white sailor. He saw her as he had seen her the day that Marcus had introduced them: saw her pale, round face; her narrow, half-open eyes, blue like the eyes of a baby; her tiny, pale ears, suggestive of anaemia; the freckles across the bridge of her nose; her pale lips; the tiara of royal black hair; and, above all, the delicious poise of the head, tipped back as though by the weight of all that hair -- the poise that thrust out her chin a little, with the movement that was so confiding, so innocent, so nearly infantile.

McTeague went softly about the room from one object to another, beholding Trina in everything he touched or looked at. He came at last to the closet door. It was ajar. He opened it wide, and paused upon the threshold.

Trina's clothes were hanging there -- skirts and waists, jackets, and stiff white petticoats. What a vision! For an instant McTeague caught his breath, spellbound. If he had suddenly discovered Trina herself there, smiling at him, holding out her hands, he could hardly have been more overcome. Instantly he recognized the black dress she had worn on that famous first day. There it was, the little jacket she had carried over her arm the day he had terrified her with his blundering declaration, and still others, and others -- a whole group of Trinas faced him there. He went farther into the closet, touching the clothes gingerly, stroking them softly with his huge leathern palms. As he stirred them a delicate perfume disengaged itself from the folds. Ah, that exquisite feminine odor! It was not only her hair now, it was Trina herself -- her mouth, her hands, her neck; the indescribably sweet, fleshly aroma that was a part of her, pure and clean, and redolent of youth and freshness. All at once, seized with an unreasoned impulse, McTeague opened his huge arms and gathered the little garments close to him, plunging his face deep amongst them, savoring their delicious odor with long breaths of luxury and supreme content.

* * * * *

The picnic at Schuetzen Park decided matters. McTeague began to call on Trina regularly Sunday and Wednesday afternoons. He took Marcus Schouler's place. Sometimes Marcus accompanied him, but it was generally to meet Selina by appointment at the Sieppes's house.

But Marcus made the most of his renunciation of his cousin. He remembered his pose from time to time. He made McTeague unhappy and bewildered by wringing his hand, by venting sighs that seemed to tear his heart out, or by giving evidences of an infinite melancholy. "What is my life!" he would exclaim. "What is left for me? Nothing, by damn!" And when McTeague would attempt remonstrance, he would cry: "Never mind, old man. Never mind me. Go, be happy. I forgive you."

Forgive what? McTeague was all at sea, was harassed with the thought of some shadowy, irreparable injury he had done his friend.

"Oh, don't think of me!" Marcus would exclaim at other times, even when Trina was by. "Don't think of me; I don't count any more. I ain't in it." Marcus seemed to take great pleasure in contemplating the wreck of his life. There is no doubt he enjoyed himself hugely during these days.

The Sieppes were at first puzzled as well over this change of front.

"Trina has den a new younge man," cried Mr. Sieppe. "First Schouler, now der doktor, eh? What die tevil, I say!"

Weeks passed, February went, March came in very rainy, putting a stop to all their picnics and Sunday excursions.

One Wednesday afternoon in the second week in March McTeague came over to call on Trina, bringing his concertina with him, as was his custom nowadays. As he got off the train at the station he was surprised to find Trina waiting for him.

"This is the first day it hasn't rained in weeks," she explained, "an' I thought it would be nice to walk."

"Sure, sure," assented McTeague.

B Street station was nothing more than a little shed. There was no ticket office, nothing but a couple of whittled and carven benches. It was built close to the railroad tracks, just across which was the dirty, muddy shore of San Francisco Bay. About a quarter of a mile back from the station was the edge of the town of Oakland. Between the station and the first houses of the town lay immense salt flats, here and there broken by winding streams of black water. They were covered with a growth of wiry grass, strangely discolored in places by enormous stains of orange yellow.

Near the station a bit of fence painted with a cigar advertisement reeled over into the mud, while under its lee lay an abandoned gravel wagon with dished wheels. The station was connected with the town by the extension of B Street, which struck across the flats geometrically straight, a file of tall poles with

intervening wires marching along with it. At the station these were headed by an iron electric-light pole that, with its supports and outriggers, looked for all the world like an immense grasshopper on its hind legs.

Across the flats, at the fringe of the town, were the dump heaps, the figures of a few Chinese rag-pickers moving over them. Far to the left the view was shut off by the immense red-brown drum of the gas-works; to the right it was bounded by the chimneys and workshops of an iron foundry.

Across the railroad tracks, to seaward, one saw the long stretch of black mud bank left bare by the tide, which was far out, nearly half a mile. Clouds of sea-gulls were forever rising and settling upon this mud bank; a wrecked and abandoned wharf crawled over it on tottering legs; close in an old sailboat lay canted on her bilge.

But farther on, across the yellow waters of the bay, beyond Goat Island, lay San Francisco, a blue line of hills, rugged with roofs and spires. Far to the westward opened the Golden Gate, a bleak cutting in the sand-hills, through which one caught a glimpse of the open Pacific.

The station at B Street was solitary; no trains passed at this hour; except the distant rag-pickers, not a soul was in sight. The wind blew strong, carrying with it the mingled smell of salt, of tar, of dead seaweed, and of bilge. The sky hung low and brown; at long intervals a few drops of rain fell.

Near the station Trina and McTeague sat on the roadbed of the tracks, at the edge of the mud bank, making the most out of the landscape, enjoying the open air, the salt marshes, and the sight of the distant water. From time to time McTeague played his six mournful airs upon his concertina.

After a while they began walking up and down the tracks, McTeague talking about his profession, Trina listening, very interested and absorbed, trying to understand.

"For pulling the roots of the upper molars we use the cow-horn forceps," continued the dentist, monotonously. "We get the inside beak over the palatal roots and the cow-horn beak over the buccal roots -- that's the roots on the outside, you see. Then we close the forceps, and that breaks right through the alveolus -- that's the part of the socket in the jaw, you understand."

At another moment he told her of his one unsatisfied desire. "Some day I'm going to have a big gilded tooth outside my window for a sign. Those big gold teeth are beautiful, beautiful -- only they cost so much, I can't afford one just now."

"Oh, it's raining," suddenly exclaimed Trina, holding out her palm. They turned back and reached the station in a drizzle. The afternoon was closing in dark and rainy. The tide was coming back, talking and lapping for miles along the mud bank. Far off across the flats, at the edge of the town, an electric car went by, stringing out a long row of diamond sparks on the overhead wires.

"Say, Miss Trina," said McTeague, after a while, "what's the good of waiting any longer? Why can't us two get married?"

Trina still shook her head, saying "No" instinctively, in spite of herself.

"Why not?" persisted McTeague. "Don't you like me well enough?"

"Yes."

"Then why not?"

"Because."

"Ah, come on," he said, but Trina still shook her head.

"Ah, come on," urged McTeague. He could think of nothing else to say, repeating the same phrase over and over again to all her refusals.

"Ah, come on! Ah, come on!"

Suddenly he took her in his enormous arms, crushing down her struggle with his immense strength. Then Trina gave up, all in an instant, turning her head to his. They kissed each other, grossly, full in the mouth.

A roar and a jarring of the earth suddenly grew near and passed them in a reek of steam and hot air. It was the Overland, with its flaming headlight, on its way across the continent.

The passage of the train startled them both. Trina struggled to free herself from McTeague. "Oh, please! please!" she pleaded, on the point of tears. McTeague released her, but in that moment a slight, a barely perceptible, revulsion of feeling had taken place in him. The instant that Trina gave up, the instant she allowed him to kiss her, he thought less of her. She was not so desirable, after all. But this reaction was so faint, so subtle, so intangible, that in another moment he had doubted its occurrence. Yet afterward it returned. Was there not something gone from Trina now? Was he not disappointed in her for doing that very thing for which he had longed? Was Trina the submissive, the compliant, the attainable just the same, just as delicate and adorable as Trina the inaccessible? Perhaps he dimly saw that this must be so, that it belonged to the changeless order of things -- the man desiring the woman only for what she withholds; the woman worshipping the man for that which she yields up to him. With each concession gained the man's desire cools; with every surrender made the woman's adoration increases. But why should it be so?

Trina wrenched herself free and drew back from McTeague, her little chin quivering; her face, even to the lobes of her pale ears, flushed scarlet; her narrow blue eyes brimming. Suddenly she put her head between her hands and began to sob.

"Say, say, Miss Trina, listen -- listen here, Miss Trina," cried McTeague, coming forward a step.

"Oh, don't!" she gasped, shrinking. "I must go home," she cried, springing to her feet. "It's late. I must. I must. Don't come with me, please. Oh, I'm so -- so,"

-- she could not find any words. "Let me go alone," she went on. "You may -- you come Sunday. Good-by."

"Good-by," said McTeague, his head in a whirl at this sudden, unaccountable change. "Can't I kiss you again?" But Trina was firm now. When it came to his pleading -- a mere matter of words -- she was strong enough.

"No, no, you must not!" she exclaimed, with energy. She was gone in another instant. The dentist, stunned, bewildered, gazed stupidly after her as she ran up the extension of B Street through the rain.

But suddenly a great joy took possession of him. He had won her. Trina was to be for him, after all. An enormous smile distended his thick lips; his eyes grew wide, and flashed; and he drew his breath quickly, striking his mallet-like fist upon his knee, and exclaiming under his breath:

"I got her, by God! I got her, by God!" At the same time he thought better of himself; his self-respect increased enormously. The man that could win Trina Sieppe was a man of extraordinary ability.

Trina burst in upon her mother while the latter was setting a mousetrap in the kitchen.

"Oh, mamma!"

"Eh? Trina? Ach, what has happun?"

Trina told her in a breath.

"Soh soon?" was Mrs. Sieppe's first comment. "Eh, well, what you cry for, then?"

"I don't know," wailed Trina, plucking at the end of her handkerchief.

"You loaf der younge doktor?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what for you kiss him?"

"I don't know."

"You don' know, you don' know? Where haf your sensus gone, Trina? You kiss der doktor. You cry, and you don' know. Is ut Marcus den?"

"No, it's not Cousin Mark."

"Den ut must be der doktor."

Trina made no answer.

"Eh?"

"I -- I guess so."

"You loaf him?"

"I don't know."

Mrs. Sieppe set down the mousetrap with such violence that it sprung with a sharp snap.

Chapter 6

No, Trina did not know.

"Do I love him? Do I love him?"

A thousand times she put the question to herself during the next two or three days. At night she hardly slept, but lay broad awake for hours in her little, gayly painted bed, with its white netting, torturing herself with doubts and questions. At times she remembered the scene in the station with a veritable agony of shame, and at other times she was ashamed to recall it with a thrill of joy. Nothing could have been more sudden, more unexpected, than that surrender of herself. For over a year she had thought that Marcus would some day be her husband. They would be married, she supposed, some time in the future, she did not know exactly when; the matter did not take definite shape in her mind. She liked Cousin Mark very well. And then suddenly this cross-current had set in; this blond giant had appeared, this huge, stolid fellow, with his immense, crude strength. She had not loved him at first, that was certain. The day he had spoken to her in his "Parlors" she had only been terrified. If he had confined himself to merely speaking, as did Marcus, to pleading with her, to wooing her at a distance, forestalling her wishes, showing her little attentions, sending her boxes of candy, she could have easily withstood him. But he had only to take her in his arms, to crush down her struggle with his enormous strength, to subdue her, conquer her by sheer brute force, and she gave up in an instant.

But why -- why had she done so? Why did she feel the desire, the necessity of being conquered by a superior strength? Why did it please her? Why had it suddenly thrilled her from head to foot with a quick, terrifying gust of passion, the like of which she had never known? Never at his best had Marcus made her feel like that, and yet she had always thought she cared for Cousin Mark more than for any one else.

When McTeague had all at once caught her in his huge arms, something had leaped to life in her -- something that had hitherto lain dormant, something strong and overpowering. It frightened her now as she thought of it, this second self that had wakened within her, and that shouted and clamored for recognition. And yet, was it to be feared? Was it something to be ashamed of? Was it not, after all, natural, clean, spontaneous? Trina knew that she was a pure girl; knew that this sudden commotion within her carried with it no suggestion of vice.

Dimly, as figures seen in a waking dream, these ideas floated through Trina's mind. It was quite beyond her to realize them clearly; she could not know what they meant. Until that rainy day by the shore of the bay Trina had lived her life with as little self-consciousness as a tree. She was frank, straightforward, a healthy, natural human being, without sex as yet. She was

almost like a boy. At once there had been a mysterious disturbance. The woman within her suddenly awoke.

Did she love McTeague? Difficult question. Did she choose him for better or for worse, deliberately, of her own free will, or was Trina herself allowed even a choice in the taking of that step that was to make or mar her life? The Woman is awakened, and, starting from her sleep, catches blindly at what first her newly opened eyes light upon. It is a spell, a witchery, ruled by chance alone, inexplicable -- a fairy queen enamored of a clown with ass's ears.

McTeague had awakened the Woman, and, whether she would or no, she was his now irrevocably; struggle against it as she would, she belonged to him, body and soul, for life or for death. She had not sought it, she had not desired it. The spell was laid upon her. Was it a blessing? Was it a curse? It was all one; she was his, indissolubly, for evil or for good.

And he? The very act of submission that bound the woman to him forever had made her seem less desirable in his eyes. Their undoing had already begun. Yet neither of them was to blame. From the first they had not sought each other. Chance had brought them face to face, and mysterious instincts as ungovernable as the winds of heaven were at work knitting their lives together. Neither of them had asked that this thing should be -- that their destinies, their very souls, should be the sport of chance. If they could have known, they would have shunned the fearful risk. But they were allowed no voice in the matter. Why should it all be?

It had been on a Wednesday that the scene in the B Street station had taken place. Throughout the rest of the week, at every hour of the day, Trina asked herself the same question: "Do I love him? Do I really love him? Is this what love is like?" As she recalled McTeague -- recalled his huge, square-cut head, his salient jaw, his shock of yellow hair, his heavy, lumbering body, his slow wits -- she found little to admire in him beyond his physical strength, and at such moments she shook her head decisively. "No, surely she did not love him." Sunday afternoon, however, McTeague called. Trina had prepared a little speech for him. She was to tell him that she did not know what had been the matter with her that Wednesday afternoon; that she had acted like a bad girl; that she did not love him well enough to marry him; that she had told him as much once before.

McTeague saw her alone in the little front parlor. The instant she appeared he came straight towards her. She saw what he was bent upon doing. "Wait a minute," she cried, putting out her hands. "Wait. You don't understand. I have got something to say to you." She might as well have talked to the wind. McTeague put aside her hands with a single gesture, and gripped her to him in a bearlike embrace that all but smothered her. Trina was but a reed before that giant strength. McTeague turned her face to his and kissed her again upon the mouth. Where was all Trina's resolve then? Where was her carefully prepared

little speech? Where was all her hesitation and torturing doubts of the last few days? She clasped McTeague's huge red neck with both her slender arms; she raised her adorable little chin and kissed him in return, exclaiming: "Oh, I do love you! I do love you!" Never afterward were the two so happy as at that moment.

A little later in that same week, when Marcus and McTeague were taking lunch at the car conductors' coffee-joint, the former suddenly exclaimed:

"Say, Mac, now that you've got Trina, you ought to do more for her. By damn! you ought to, for a fact. Why don't you take her out somewhere -- to the theatre, or somewhere? You ain't on to your job."

Naturally, McTeague had told Marcus of his success with Trina. Marcus had taken on a grand air.

"You've got her, have you? Well, I'm glad of it, old man. I am, for a fact. I know you'll be happy with her. I know how I would have been. I forgive you; yes, I forgive you, freely."

McTeague had not thought of taking Trina to the theatre.

"You think I ought to, Mark?" he inquired, hesitating. Marcus answered, with his mouth full of suet pudding:

"Why, of course. That's the proper caper."

"Well -- well, that's so. The theatre -- that's the word."

"Take her to the variety show at the Orpheum. There's a good show there this week; you'll have to take Mrs. Sieppe, too, of course," he added. Marcus was not sure of himself as regarded certain proprieties, nor, for that matter, were any of the people of the little world of Polk Street. The shop girls, the plumbers' apprentices, the small tradespeople, and their like, whose social position was not clearly defined, could never be sure how far they could go and yet preserve their "respectability." When they wished to be "proper," they invariably overdid the thing. It was not as if they belonged to the "tough" element, who had no appearances to keep up. Polk Street rubbed elbows with the "avenue" one block above. There were certain limits which its dwellers could not overstep; but unfortunately for them, these limits were poorly defined. They could never be sure of themselves. At an unguarded moment they might be taken for "toughs," so they generally erred in the other direction, and were absurdly formal. No people have a keener eye for the amenities than those whose social position is not assured.

"Oh, sure, you'll have to take her mother," insisted Marcus. "It wouldn't be the proper racket if you didn't."

McTeague undertook the affair. It was an ordeal. Never in his life had he been so perturbed, so horribly anxious. He called upon Trina the following Wednesday and made arrangements. Mrs. Sieppe asked if little August might be included. It would console him for the loss of his steamboat.

"Sure, sure," said McTeague. "August too -- everybody," he added, vaguely.

"We always have to leave so early," complained Trina, "in order to catch the last boat. Just when it's becoming interesting."

At this McTeague, acting upon a suggestion of Marcus Schouler's, insisted they should stay at the flat over night. Marcus and the dentist would give up their rooms to them and sleep at the dog hospital. There was a bed there in the sick ward that old Grannis sometimes occupied when a bad case needed watching. All at once McTeague had an idea, a veritable inspiration.

"And we'll -- we'll -- we'll have -- what's the matter with having something to eat afterward in my "Parlors?"

"Vairy goot," commented Mrs. Sieppe. "Bier, eh? And some damales."

"Oh, I love tamales!" exclaimed Trina, clasping her hands.

McTeague returned to the city, rehearsing his instructions over and over. The theatre party began to assume tremendous proportions. First of all, he was to get the seats, the third or fourth row from the front, on the left-hand side, so as to be out of the hearing of the drums in the orchestra; he must make arrangements about the rooms with Marcus, must get in the beer, but not the tamales; must buy for himself a white lawn tie -- so Marcus directed; must look to it that Maria Macapa put his room in perfect order; and, finally, must meet the Sieppes at the ferry slip at half-past seven the following Monday night.

The real labor of the affair began with the buying of the tickets. At the theatre McTeague got into wrong entrances; was sent from one wicket to another; was bewildered, confused; misunderstood directions; was at one moment suddenly convinced that he had not enough money with him, and started to return home. Finally he found himself at the box-office wicket.

"Is it here you buy your seats?"

"How many?"

"Is it here -- "

"What night do you want 'em? Yes, sir, here's the place."

McTeague gravely delivered himself of the formula he had been reciting for the last dozen hours.

"I want four seats for Monday night in the fourth row from the front, and on the right-hand side."

"Right hand as you face the house or as you face the stage?" McTeague was dumfounded.

"I want to be on the right-hand side," he insisted, stolidly; adding, "in order to be away from the drums."

"Well, the drums are on the right of the orchestra as you face the stage," shouted the other impatiently; "you want to the left, then, as you face the house."

"I want to be on the right-hand side," persisted the dentist.

Without a word the seller threw out four tickets with a magnificent, supercilious gesture.

"There's four seats on the right-hand side, then, and you're right up against the drums."

"But I don't want to be near the drums," protested McTeague, beginning to perspire.

"Do you know what you want at all?" said the ticket seller with calmness, thrusting his head at McTeague. The dentist knew that he had hurt this young man's feelings.

"I want -- I want," he stammered. The seller slammed down a plan of the house in front of him and began to explain excitedly. It was the one thing lacking to complete McTeague's confusion.

"There are your seats," finished the seller, shoving the tickets into McTeague's hands. "They are the fourth row from the front, and away from the drums. Now are you satisfied?"

"Are they on the right-hand side? I want on the right -- no, I want on the left. I want -- I don't know, I don't know."

The seller roared. McTeague moved slowly away, gazing stupidly at the blue slips of pasteboard. Two girls took his place at the wicket. In another moment McTeague came back, peering over the girls' shoulders and calling to the seller:

"Are these for Monday night?"

The other disdained reply. McTeague retreated again timidly, thrusting the tickets into his immense wallet. For a moment he stood thoughtful on the steps of the entrance. Then all at once he became enraged, he did not know exactly why; somehow he felt himself slighted. Once more he came back to the wicket.

"You can't make small of me," he shouted over the girls' shoulders; "you -- you can't make small of me. I'll thump you in the head, you little -- you little -- you little -- little -- little pup."

The ticket seller shrugged his shoulders wearily. "A dollar and a half," he said to the two girls.

McTeague glared at him and breathed loudly. Finally he decided to let the matter drop. He moved away, but on the steps was once more seized with a sense of injury and outraged dignity.

"You can't make small of me," he called back a last time, wagging his head and shaking his fist. "I will -- I will -- I will -- yes, I will." He went off muttering.

At last Monday night came. McTeague met the Sieppes at the ferry, dressed in a black Prince Albert coat and his best slate-blue trousers, and wearing the made-up lawn necktie that Marcus had selected for him. Trina was very pretty in the black dress that McTeague knew so well. She wore a pair of new gloves.

Mrs. Sieppe had on lisle-thread mits, and carried two bananas and an orange in a net reticule. "For Owgooste," she confided to him. Owgooste was in a Fauntleroy "costume" very much too small for him. Already he had been crying.

"Woult you pelief, Doktor, dot bube has torn his stockun alreatty? Walk in der front, you; stop cryun. Where is dot berliceman?"

At the door of the theatre McTeague was suddenly seized with a panic terror. He had lost the tickets. He tore through his pockets, ransacked his wallet. They were nowhere to be found. All at once he remembered, and with a gasp of relief removed his hat and took them out from beneath the sweatband.

The party entered and took their places. It was absurdly early. The lights were all darkened, the ushers stood under the galleries in groups, the empty auditorium echoing with their noisy talk. Occasionally a waiter with his tray and clean white apron sauntered up and down the aisle. Directly in front of them was the great iron curtain of the stage, painted with all manner of advertisements. From behind this came a noise of hammering and of occasional loud voices.

While waiting they studied their programmes. First was an overture by the orchestra, after which came "The Gleasons, in their mirth-moving musical farce, entitled 'McMonnigal's Court-ship.'" This was to be followed by "The Lamont Sisters, Winnie and Violet, serio-comiques and skirt dancers." And after this came a great array of other "artists" and "specialty performers," musical wonders, acrobats, lightning artists, ventriloquists, and last of all, "The feature of the evening, the crowning scientific achievement of the nineteenth century, the kinetoscope." McTeague was excited, dazzled. In five years he had not been twice to the theatre. Now he beheld himself inviting his "girl" and her mother to accompany him. He began to feel that he was a man of the world. He ordered a cigar.

Meanwhile the house was filling up. A few side brackets were turned on. The ushers ran up and down the aisles, stubs of tickets between their thumb and finger, and from every part of the auditorium could be heard the sharp clap-clapping of the seats as the ushers flipped them down. A buzz of talk arose. In the gallery a street gamin whistled shrilly, and called to some friends on the other side of the house.

"Are they go-wun to begin pretty soon, ma?" whined Owgooste for the fifth or sixth time; adding, "Say, ma, can't I have some candy?" A cadaverous little boy had appeared in their aisle, chanting, "Candies, French mixed candies, popcorn, peanuts and candy." The orchestra entered, each man crawling out from an opening under the stage, hardly larger than the gate of a rabbit hutch. At every instant now the crowd increased; there were but few seats that were not taken. The waiters hurried up and down the aisles, their trays laden with beer glasses. A smell of cigar-smoke filled the air, and soon a faint blue haze rose from all corners of the house.

"Ma, when are they go-wun to begin?" cried Owgooste. As he spoke the iron advertisement curtain rose, disclosing the curtain proper underneath. This latter curtain was quite an affair. Upon it was painted a wonderful picture. A flight of marble steps led down to a stream of water; two white swans, their necks arched like the capital letter S, floated about. At the head of the marble steps were two vases filled with red and yellow flowers, while at the foot was moored a gondola. This gondola was full of red velvet rugs that hung over the side and trailed in the water. In the prow of the gondola a young man in vermilion tights held a mandolin in his left hand, and gave his right to a girl in white satin. A King Charles spaniel, dragging a leading-string in the shape of a huge pink sash, followed the girl. Seven scarlet roses were scattered upon the two lowest steps, and eight floated in the water.

"Ain't that pretty, Mac?" exclaimed Trina, turning to the dentist.

"Ma, ain't they go-wun to begin now-wow?" whined Owgooste. Suddenly the lights all over the house blazed up. "Ah!" said everybody all at once.

"Ain't ut crowdut?" murmured Mr. Sieppe. Every seat was taken; many were even standing up.

"I always like it better when there is a crowd," said Trina. She was in great spirits that evening. Her round, pale face was positively pink.

The orchestra banged away at the overture, suddenly finishing with a great flourish of violins. A short pause followed. Then the orchestra played a quick-step strain, and the curtain rose on an interior furnished with two red chairs and a green sofa. A girl in a short blue dress and black stockings entered in a hurry and began to dust the two chairs. She was in a great temper, talking very fast, disclaiming against the "new lodger." It appeared that this latter never paid his rent; that he was given to late hours. Then she came down to the footlights and began to sing in a tremendous voice, hoarse and flat, almost like a man's. The chorus, of a feeble originality, ran:

*"Oh, how happy I will be,
When my darling's face I'll see;
Oh, tell him for to meet me in the moonlight,
Down where the golden lilies bloom."*

The orchestra played the tune of this chorus a second time, with certain variations, while the girl danced to it. She sidled to one side of the stage and kicked, then sidled to the other and kicked again. As she finished with the song, a man, evidently the lodger in question, came in. Instantly McTeague exploded in a roar of laughter. The man was intoxicated, his hat was knocked in, one end of his collar was unfastened and stuck up into his face, his watch-chain dangled from his pocket, and a yellow satin slipper was tied to a button-hole of his vest;

his nose was vermilion, one eye was black and blue. After a short dialogue with the girl, a third actor appeared. He was dressed like a little boy, the girl's younger brother. He wore an immense turned-down collar, and was continually doing hand-springs and wonderful back somersaults. The "act" devolved upon these three people; the lodger making love to the girl in the short blue dress, the boy playing all manner of tricks upon him, giving him tremendous digs in the ribs or slaps upon the back that made him cough, pulling chairs from under him, running on all fours between his legs and upsetting him, knocking him over at inopportune moments. Every one of his falls was accentuated by a bang upon the bass drum. The whole humor of the "act" seemed to consist in the tripping up of the intoxicated lodger.

This horse-play delighted McTeague beyond measure. He roared and shouted every time the lodger went down, slapping his knee, wagging his head. Owgooste crowed shrilly, clapping his hands and continually asking, "What did he say, ma? What did he say?" Mrs. Sieppe laughed immoderately, her huge fat body shaking like a mountain of jelly. She exclaimed from time to time, "Ach, Gott, dot fool!" Even Trina was moved, laughing demurely, her lips closed, putting one hand with its new glove to her mouth.

The performance went on. Now it was the "musical marvels," two men extravagantly made up as negro minstrels, with immense shoes and plaid vests. They seemed to be able to wrestle a tune out of almost anything -- glass bottles, cigar-box fiddles, strings of sleigh-bells, even graduated brass tubes, which they rubbed with resined fingers. McTeague was stupefied with admiration.

"That's what you call musicians," he announced gravely. "Home, Sweet Home," played upon a trombone. Think of that! Art could go no farther.

The acrobats left him breathless. They were dazzling young men with beautifully parted hair, continually making graceful gestures to the audience. In one of them the dentist fancied he saw a strong resemblance to the boy who had tormented the intoxicated lodger and who had turned such marvellous somersaults. Trina could not bear to watch their antics. She turned away her head with a little shudder. "It always makes me sick," she explained.

The beautiful young lady, "The Society Contralto," in evening dress, who sang the sentimental songs, and carried the sheets of music at which she never looked, pleased McTeague less. Trina, however, was captivated. She grew pensive over

*"You do not love me -- no;
Bid me good-by and go;"*

and split her new gloves in her enthusiasm when it was finished.
"Don't you love sad music, Mac?" she murmured.

Then came the two comedians. They talked with fearful rapidity; their wit and repartee seemed inexhaustible.

"As I was going down the street yesterday -- "

"Ah! as YOU were going down the street -- all right."

"I saw a girl at a window -- -- "

"YOU saw a girl at a window."

"And this girl she was a corker -- -- "

"Ah! as YOU were going down the street yesterday YOU saw a girl at a window, and this girl she was a corker. All right, go on."

The other comedian went on. The joke was suddenly evolved. A certain phrase led to a song, which was sung with lightning rapidity, each performer making precisely the same gestures at precisely the same instant. They were irresistible. McTeague, though he caught but a third of the jokes, could have listened all night.

After the comedians had gone out, the iron advertisement curtain was let down.

"What comes now?" said McTeague, bewildered.

"It's the intermission of fifteen minutes now."

The musicians disappeared through the rabbit hutch, and the audience stirred and stretched itself. Most of the young men left their seats.

During this intermission McTeague and his party had "refreshments." Mrs. Sieppe and Trina had Queen Charlottes, McTeague drank a glass of beer, Owgooste ate the orange and one of the bananas. He begged for a glass of lemonade, which was finally given him.

"Joost to geep um quiet," observed Mrs. Sieppe.

But almost immediately after drinking his lemonade Owgooste was seized with a sudden restlessness. He twisted and wriggled in his seat, swinging his legs violently, looking about him with eyes full of a vague distress. At length, just as the musicians were returning, he stood up and whispered energetically in his mother's ear. Mrs. Sieppe was exasperated at once.

"No, no," she cried, reseating him brusquely.

The performance was resumed. A lightning artist appeared, drawing caricatures and portraits with incredible swiftness. He even went so far as to ask for subjects from the audience, and the names of prominent men were shouted to him from the gallery. He drew portraits of the President, of Grant, of Washington, of Napoleon Bonaparte, of Bismarck, of Garibaldi, of P. T. Barnum.

And so the evening passed. The hall grew very hot, and the smoke of innumerable cigars made the eyes smart. A thick blue mist hung low over the heads of the audience. The air was full of varied smells -- the smell of stale

cigars, of flat beer, of orange peel, of gas, of sachet powders, and of cheap perfumery.

One "artist" after another came upon the stage. McTeague's attention never wandered for a minute. Trina and her mother enjoyed themselves hugely. At every moment they made comments to one another, their eyes never leaving the stage.

"Ain't dot fool joost too funny?"

"That's a pretty song. Don't you like that kind of a song?"

"Wonderful! It's wonderful! Yes, yes, wonderful! That's the word."

Owgooste, however, lost interest. He stood up in his place, his back to the stage, chewing a piece of orange peel and watching a little girl in her father's lap across the aisle, his eyes fixed in a glassy, ox-like stare. But he was uneasy. He danced from one foot to the other, and at intervals appealed in hoarse whispers to his mother, who disdained an answer.

"Ma, say, ma-ah," he whined, abstractedly chewing his orange peel, staring at the little girl.

"Ma-ah, say, ma." At times his monotonous plaint reached his mother's consciousness. She suddenly realized what this was that was annoying her.

"Owgooste, will you sit down?" She caught him up all at once, and jammed him down into his place. "Be quiet, den; loog; listun at der yunge girls."

Three young women and a young man who played a zither occupied the stage. They were dressed in Tyrolese costume; they were yodlers, and sang in German about "mountain tops" and "bold hunters" and the like. The yodling chorus was a marvel of flute-like modulations. The girls were really pretty, and were not made up in the least. Their "turn" had a great success. Mrs. Sieppe was entranced. Instantly she remembered her girlhood and her native Swiss village.

"Ach, dot is heavunly; joost like der old country. Mein gran'mutter used to be one of der mos' famous yodlers. When I was leedle, I haf seen dem joost like dat."

"Ma-ah," began Owgooste fretfully, as soon as the yodlers had departed. He could not keep still an instant; he twisted from side to side, swinging his legs with incredible swiftness.

"Ma-ah, I want to go ho-ome."

"Pehave!" exclaimed his mother, shaking him by the arm; "loog, der leedle girl is watchun you. Dis is der last dime I take you to der blay, you see."

"I don't ca-are; I'm sleepy." At length, to their great relief, he went to sleep, his head against his mother's arm.

The kinetoscope fairly took their breaths away.

"What will they do next?" observed Trina, in amazement. "Ain't that wonderful, Mac?"

McTeague was awe-struck.

"Look at that horse move his head," he cried excitedly, quite carried away. "Look at that cable car coming -- and the man going across the street. See, here comes a truck. Well, I never in all my life! What would Marcus say to this?"

"It's all a drick!" exclaimed Mrs. Sieppe, with sudden conviction. "I ain't no fool; dot's nothun but a drick."

"Well, of course, mamma," exclaimed Trina, "it's -- -- "

But Mrs. Sieppe put her head in the air.

"I'm too old to be fooled," she persisted. "It's a drick." Nothing more could be got out of her than this.

The party stayed to the very end of the show, though the kinetoscope was the last number but one on the programme, and fully half the audience left immediately afterward. However, while the unfortunate Irish comedian went through his "act" to the backs of the departing people, Mrs. Sieppe woke Owgooste, very cross and sleepy, and began getting her "things together." As soon as he was awake Owgooste began fidgeting again.

"Save der brogramme, Trina," whispered Mrs. Sieppe. "Take ut home to popper. Where is der hat of Owgooste? Haf you got mein handkerchief, Trina?"

But at this moment a dreadful accident happened to Owgooste; his distress reached its climax; his fortitude collapsed. What a misery! It was a veritable catastrophe, deplorable, lamentable, a thing beyond words! For a moment he gazed wildly about him, helpless and petrified with astonishment and terror. Then his grief found utterance, and the closing strains of the orchestra were mingled with a prolonged wail of infinite sadness.

"Owgooste, what is ut?" cried his mother eyeing him with dawning suspicion; then suddenly, "What haf you done? You haf ruin your new Vauntleroy gostume!" Her face blazed; without more ado she smacked him soundly. Then it was that Owgooste touched the limit of his misery, his unhappiness, his horrible discomfort; his utter wretchedness was complete. He filled the air with his doleful outcries. The more he was smacked and shaken, the louder he wept.

"What -- what is the matter?" inquired McTeague.

Trina's face was scarlet. "Nothing, nothing," she exclaimed hastily, looking away. "Come, we must be going. It's about over." The end of the show and the breaking up of the audience tided over the embarrassment of the moment.

The party filed out at the tail end of the audience. Already the lights were being extinguished and the ushers spreading druggeting over the upholstered seats.

McTeague and the Sieppes took an uptown car that would bring them near Polk Street. The car was crowded; McTeague and Owgooste were obliged to stand. The little boy fretted to be taken in his mother's lap, but Mrs. Sieppe emphatically refused.

On their way home they discussed the performance.

"I -- I like best der yodlers."

"Ah, the soloist was the best -- the lady who sang those sad songs."

"Wasn't -- wasn't that magic lantern wonderful, where the figures moved? Wonderful -- ah, wonderful! And wasn't that first act funny, where the fellow fell down all the time? And that musical act, and the fellow with the burnt-cork face who played 'Nearer, My God, to Thee' on the beer bottles."

They got off at Polk Street and walked up a block to the flat. The street was dark and empty; opposite the flat, in the back of the deserted market, the ducks and geese were calling persistently.

As they were buying their tamales from the half-breed Mexican at the street corner, McTeague observed:

"Marcus ain't gone to bed yet. See, there's a light in his window. There!" he exclaimed at once, "I forgot the doorkey. Well, Marcus can let us in."

Hardly had he rung the bell at the street door of the flat when the bolt was shot back. In the hall at the top of the long, narrow staircase there was the sound of a great scurrying. Maria Macapa stood there, her hand upon the rope that drew the bolt; Marcus was at her side; Old Grannis was in the background, looking over their shoulders; while little Miss Baker leant over the banisters, a strange man in a drab overcoat at her side. As McTeague's party stepped into the doorway a half-dozen voices cried:

"Yes, it's them."

"Is that you, Mac?"

"Is that you, Miss Sieppe?"

"Is your name Trina Sieppe?"

Then, shriller than all the rest, Maria Macapa screamed:

"Oh, Miss Sieppe, come up here quick. Your lottery ticket has won five thousand dollars!"

Chapter 7

"What nonsense!" answered Trina.

"Ach Gott! What is ut?" cried Mrs. Sieppe, misunderstanding, supposing a calamity.

"What -- what -- what," stammered the dentist, confused by the lights, the crowded stairway, the medley of voices. The party reached the landing. The others surrounded them. Marcus alone seemed to rise to the occasion.

"Le' me be the first to congratulate you," he cried, catching Trina's hand. Everyone was talking at once.

"Miss Sieppe, Miss Sieppe, your ticket has won five thousand dollars," cried Maria. "Don't you remember the lottery ticket I sold you in Doctor McTeague's office?"

"Trina!" almost screamed her mother. "Five tausend thalers! five tausend thalers! If popper were only here!"

"What is it -- what is it?" exclaimed McTeague, rolling his eyes.

"What are you going to do with it, Trina?" inquired Marcus.

"You're a rich woman, my dear," said Miss Baker, her little false curls quivering with excitement, "and I'm glad for your sake. Let me kiss you. To think I was in the room when you bought the ticket!"

"Oh, oh!" interrupted Trina, shaking her head, "there is a mistake. There must be. Why -- why should I win five thousand dollars? It's nonsense!"

"No mistake, no mistake," screamed Maria. "Your number was 400,012. Here it is in the paper this evening. I remember it well, because I keep an account."

"But I know you're wrong," answered Trina, beginning to tremble in spite of herself. "Why should I win?"

"Eh? Why shouldn't you?" cried her mother.

In fact, why shouldn't she? The idea suddenly occurred to Trina. After all, it was not a question of effort or merit on her part. Why should she suppose a mistake? What if it were true, this wonderful fillip of fortune striking in there like some chance-driven bolt?

"Oh, do you think so?" she gasped.

The stranger in the drab overcoat came forward.

"It's the agent," cried two or three voices, simultaneously.

"I guess you're one of the lucky ones, Miss Sieppe," he said. "I suppose you have kept your ticket."

"Yes, yes; four three oughts twelve -- I remember."

"That's right," admitted the other. "Present your ticket at the local branch office as soon as possible -- the address is printed on the back of the ticket -- and you'll receive a check on our bank for five thousand dollars. Your number will have to be verified on our official list, but there's hardly a chance of a mistake. I congratulate you."

All at once a great shrill of gladness surged up in Trina. She was to possess five thousand dollars. She was carried away with the joy of her good fortune, a natural, spontaneous joy -- the gaiety of a child with a new and wonderful toy.

"Oh, I've won, I've won, I've won!" she cried, clapping her hands. "Mamma, think of it. I've won five thousand dollars, just by buying a ticket. Mac, what do you say to that? I've got five thousand dollars. August, do you hear what's happened to sister?"

"Kiss your mommer, Trina," suddenly commanded Mrs. Sieppe. "What efer will you do mit all dose money, eh, Trina?"

"Huh!" exclaimed Marcus. "Get married on it for one thing. Thereat they all shouted with laughter. McTeague grinned, and looked about sheepishly. "Talk about luck," muttered Marcus, shaking his head at the dentist; then suddenly he added:

"Well, are we going to stay talking out here in the hall all night? Can't we all come into your 'Parlors,' Mac?"

"Sure, sure," exclaimed McTeague, hastily unlocking his door.

"Efery botty gome," cried Mrs. Sieppe, genially. "Ain't ut so, Doktor?"

"Everybody," repeated the dentist. "There's -- there's some beer."

"We'll celebrate, by damn!" exclaimed Marcus. "It ain't every day you win five thousand dollars. It's only Sundays and legal holidays." Again he set the company off into a gale of laughter. Anything was funny at a time like this. In some way every one of them felt elated. The wheel of fortune had come spinning close to them. They were near to this great sum of money. It was as though they too had won.

"Here's right where I sat when I bought that ticket," cried Trina, after they had come into the "Parlors," and Marcus had lit the gas. "Right here in this chair." She sat down in one of the rigid chairs under the steel engraving. "And, Marcus, you sat here -- -- "

"And I was just getting out of the operating chair," interposed Miss Baker.

"Yes, yes. That's so; and you," continued Trina, pointing to Maria, "came up and said, 'Buy a ticket in the lottery; just a dollar.' Oh, I remember it just as plain as though it was yesterday, and I wasn't going to at first -- -- "

"And don't you know I told Maria it was against the law?"

"Yes, I remember, and then I gave her a dollar and put the ticket in my pocketbook. It's in my pocketbook now at home in the top drawer of my bureau -- oh, suppose it should be stolen now," she suddenly exclaimed.

"It's worth big money now," asserted Marcus.

"Five thousand dollars. Who would have thought it? It's wonderful." Everybody started and turned. It was McTeague. He stood in the middle of the floor, wagging his huge head. He seemed to have just realized what had happened.

"Yes, sir, five thousand dollars!" exclaimed Marcus, with a sudden unaccountable mirthlessness. "Five thousand dollars! Do you get on to that? Cousin Trina and you will be rich people."

"At six per cent, that's twenty-five dollars a month," hazarded the agent.

"Think of it. Think of it," muttered McTeague. He went aimlessly about the room, his eyes wide, his enormous hands dangling.

"A cousin of mine won forty dollars once," observed Miss Baker. "But he spent every cent of it buying more tickets, and never won anything."

Then the reminiscences began. Maria told about the butcher on the next block who had won twenty dollars the last drawing. Mrs. Sieppe knew a gasfitter in Oakland who had won several times; once a hundred dollars. Little Miss Baker announced that she had always believed that lotteries were wrong; but, just the same, five thousand was five thousand.

"It's all right when you win, ain't it, Miss Baker?" observed Marcus, with a certain sarcasm. What was the matter with Marcus? At moments he seemed singularly out of temper.

But the agent was full of stories. He told his experiences, the legends and myths that had grown up around the history of the lottery; he told of the poor newsboy with a dying mother to support who had drawn a prize of fifteen thousand; of the man who was driven to suicide through want, but who held (had he but known it) the number that two days after his death drew the capital prize of thirty thousand dollars; of the little milliner who for ten years had played the lottery without success, and who had one day declared that she would buy but one more ticket and then give up trying, and of how this last ticket had brought her a fortune upon which she could retire; of tickets that had been lost or destroyed, and whose numbers had won fabulous sums at the drawing; of criminals, driven to vice by poverty, and who had reformed after winning competencies; of gamblers who played the lottery as they would play a faro bank, turning in their winnings again as soon as made, buying thousands of tickets all over the country; of superstitions as to terminal and initial numbers, and as to lucky days of purchase; of marvelous coincidences -- three capital prizes drawn consecutively by the same town; a ticket bought by a millionaire and given to his boot-black, who won a thousand dollars upon it; the same number winning the same amount an indefinite number of times; and so on to infinity. Invariably it was the needy who won, the destitute and starving woke to wealth and plenty, the virtuous toiler suddenly found his reward in a ticket bought at a hazard; the lottery was a great charity, the friend of the people, a vast beneficent machine that recognized neither rank nor wealth nor station.

The company began to be very gay. Chairs and tables were brought in from the adjoining rooms, and Maria was sent out for more beer and tamales, and also commissioned to buy a bottle of wine and some cake for Miss Baker, who abhorred beer.

The "Dental Parlors" were in great confusion. Empty beer bottles stood on the movable rack where the instruments were kept; plates and napkins were upon the seat of the operating chair and upon the stand of shelves in the corner, side by side with the concertina and the volumes of "Allen's Practical Dentist." The canary woke and chattered crossly, his feathers puffed out; the husks of

tamales littered the floor; the stone pug dog sitting before the little stove stared at the unusual scene, his glass eyes starting from their sockets.

They drank and feasted in impromptu fashion. Marcus Schouler assumed the office of master of ceremonies; he was in a lather of excitement, rushing about here and there, opening beer bottles, serving the tamales, slapping McTeague upon the back, laughing and joking continually. He made McTeague sit at the head of the table, with Trina at his right and the agent at his left; he -- when he sat down at all -- occupied the foot, Maria Macapa at his left, while next to her was Mrs. Siette, opposite Miss Baker. Owgooste had been put to bed upon the bed-lounge.

"Where's Old Grannis?" suddenly exclaimed Marcus. Sure enough, where had the old Englishman gone? He had been there at first.

"I called him down with everybody else," cried Maria Macapa, "as soon as I saw in the paper that Miss Siette had won. We all came down to Mr. Schouler's room and waited for you to come home. I think he must have gone back to his room. I'll bet you'll find him sewing up his books."

"No, no," observed Miss Baker, "not at this hour."

Evidently the timid old gentleman had taken advantage of the confusion to slip unobtrusively away.

"I'll go bring him down," shouted Marcus; "he's got to join us."

Miss Baker was in great agitation.

"I -- I hardly think you'd better," she murmured; "he -- he -- I don't think he drinks beer."

"He takes his amusement in sewin' up books," cried Maria.

Marcus brought him down, nevertheless, having found him just preparing for bed.

"I -- I must apologize," stammered Old Grannis, as he stood in the doorway. "I had not quite expected -- I -- find -- find myself a little unprepared." He was without collar and cravat, owing to Marcus Schouler's precipitate haste. He was annoyed beyond words that Miss Baker saw him thus. Could anything be more embarrassing?

Old Grannis was introduced to Mrs. Siette and to Trina as Marcus's employer. They shook hands solemnly.

"I don't believe that he an' Miss Baker have ever been introduced," cried Maria Macapa, shrilly, "an' they've been livin' side by side for years."

The two old people were speechless, avoiding each other's gaze. It had come at last; they were to know each other, to talk together, to touch each other's hands.

Marcus brought Old Grannis around the table to little Miss Baker, dragging him by the coat sleeve, exclaiming: "Well, I thought you two people knew each other long ago. Miss Baker, this is Mr. Grannis; Mr. Grannis, this is Miss

Baker." Neither spoke. Like two little children they faced each other, awkward, constrained, tongue-tied with embarrassment. Then Miss Baker put out her hand shyly. Old Grannis touched it for an instant and let it fall.

"Now you know each other," cried Marcus, "and it's about time." For the first time their eyes met; Old Grannis trembled a little, putting his hand uncertainly to his chin. Miss Baker flushed ever so slightly, but Maria Macapa passed suddenly between them, carrying a half empty beer bottle. The two old people fell back from one another, Miss Baker resuming her seat.

"Here's a place for you over here, Mr. Grannis," cried Marcus, making room for him at his side. Old Grannis slipped into the chair, withdrawing at once from the company's notice. He stared fixedly at his plate and did not speak again. Old Miss Baker began to talk volubly across the table to Mrs. Sieppe about hot-house flowers and medicated flannels.

It was in the midst of this little impromptu supper that the engagement of Trina and the dentist was announced. In a pause in the chatter of conversation Mrs. Sieppe leaned forward and, speaking to the agent, said:

"Vell, you know also my daughter Trina get married bretty soon. She and der dentist, Doktor McTeague, eh, yes?"

There was a general exclamation.

"I thought so all along," cried Miss Baker, excitedly. "The first time I saw them together I said, 'What a pair!'"

"Delightful!" exclaimed the agent, "to be married and win a snug little fortune at the same time."

"So -- So," murmured Old Grannis, nodding at his plate.

"Good luck to you," cried Maria.

"He's lucky enough already," growled Marcus under his breath, relapsing for a moment into one of those strange moods of sullenness which had marked him throughout the evening.

Trina flushed crimson, drawing shyly nearer her mother. McTeague grinned from ear to ear, looking around from one to another, exclaiming "Huh! Huh!"

But the agent rose to his feet, a newly filled beer glass in his hand. He was a man of the world, this agent. He knew life. He was suave and easy. A diamond was on his little finger.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. There was an instant silence. "This is indeed a happy occasion. I -- I am glad to be here to-night; to be a witness to such good fortune; to partake in these -- in this celebration. Why, I feel almost as glad as if I had held four three oughts twelve myself; as if the five thousand were mine instead of belonging to our charming hostess. The good wishes of my humble self go out to Miss Sieppe in this moment of her good fortune, and I think -- in fact, I am sure I can speak for the great institution, the great company I represent. The company congratulates Miss Sieppe. We -- they -- ah -- They

wish her every happiness her new fortune can procure her. It has been my duty, my -- ah -- cheerful duty to call upon the winners of large prizes and to offer the felicitation of the company. I have, in my experience, called upon many such; but never have I seen fortune so happily bestowed as in this case. The company have dowered the prospective bride. I am sure I but echo the sentiments of this assembly when I wish all joy and happiness to this happy pair, happy in the possession of a snug little fortune, and happy -- happy in -- " he finished with a sudden inspiration -- "in the possession of each other; I drink to the health, wealth, and happiness of the future bride and groom. Let us drink standing up." They drank with enthusiasm. Marcus was carried away with the excitement of the moment.

"Outa sight, outa sight," he vociferated, clapping his hands. "Very well said. To the health of the bride. McTeague, McTeague, speech, speech!"

In an instant the whole table was clamoring for the dentist to speak. McTeague was terrified; he gripped the table with both hands, looking wildly about him.

"Speech, speech!" shouted Marcus, running around the table and endeavoring to drag McTeague up.

"No -- no -- no," muttered the other. "No speech." The company rattled upon the table with their beer glasses, insisting upon a speech. McTeague settled obstinately into his chair, very red in the face, shaking his head energetically.

"Ah, go on!" he exclaimed; "no speech."

"Ah, get up and say somethun, anyhow," persisted Marcus; "you ought to do it. It's the proper caper."

McTeague heaved himself up; there was a burst of applause; he looked slowly about him, then suddenly sat down again, shaking his head hopelessly.

"Oh, go on, Mac," cried Trina.

"Get up, say somethun, anyhow, cried Marcus, tugging at his arm; "you GOT to."

Once more McTeague rose to his feet.

"Huh!" he exclaimed, looking steadily at the table. Then he began:

"I don' know what to say -- I -- I -- I ain't never made a speech before; I -- I ain't never made a speech before. But I'm glad Trina's won the prize -- "

"Yes, I'll bet you are," muttered Marcus.

"I -- I -- I'm glad Trina's won, and I -- I want to -- I want to -- I want to -- want to say that -- you're -- all -- welcome, an' drink hearty, an' I'm much obliged to the agent. Trina and I are goin' to be married, an' I'm glad everybody's here tonight, an' you're -- all -- welcome, an' drink hearty, an' I hope you'll come again, an' you're always welcome -- an' -- I -- an' -- an' -- That's -- about -- all -- I -- gotta say." He sat down, wiping his forehead, amidst tremendous applause.

Soon after that the company pushed back from the table and relaxed into couples and groups. The men, with the exception of Old Grannis, began to smoke, the smell of their tobacco mingling with the odors of ether, creosote, and stale bedding, which pervaded the "Parlors." Soon the windows had to be lowered from the top. Mrs. Siette and old Miss Baker sat together in the bay window exchanging confidences. Miss Baker had turned back the overskirt of her dress; a plate of cake was in her lap; from time to time she sipped her wine with the delicacy of a white cat. The two women were much interested in each other. Miss Baker told Mrs. Siette all about Old Grannis, not forgetting the fiction of the title and the unjust stepfather.

"He's quite a personage really," said Miss Baker.

Mrs. Siette led the conversation around to her children. "Ach, Trina is sudge a goote girl," she said; "always gay, yes, und sing from morgen to night. Und Owgooste, he is soh smart also, yes, eh? He has der genius for machines, always making somethun mit wheels und sbrings."

"Ah, if -- if -- I had children," murmured the little old maid a trifle wistfully, "one would have been a sailor; he would have begun as a midshipman on my brother's ship; in time he would have been an officer. The other would have been a landscape gardener."

"Oh, Mac!" exclaimed Trina, looking up into the dentist's face, "think of all this money coming to us just at this very moment. Isn't it wonderful? Don't it kind of scare you?"

"Wonderful, wonderful!" muttered McTeague, shaking his head. "Let's buy a lot of tickets," he added, struck with an idea.

"Now, that's how you can always tell a good cigar," observed the agent to Marcus as the two sat smoking at the end of the table. "The light end should be rolled to a point."

"Ah, the Chinese cigar-makers," cried Marcus, in a passion, brandishing his fist. "It's them as is ruining the cause of white labor. They are, they are for a FACT. Ah, the rat-eaters! Ah, the white-livered curs!"

Over in the corner, by the stand of shelves, Old Grannis was listening to Maria Macapa. The Mexican woman had been violently stirred over Trina's sudden wealth; Maria's mind had gone back to her younger days. She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands, her eyes wide and fixed. Old Grannis listened to her attentively.

"There wa'n't a piece that was so much as scratched," Maria was saying. "Every piece was just like a mirror, smooth and bright; oh, bright as a little sun. Such a service as that was -- platters and soup tureens and an immense big punch-bowl. Five thousand dollars, what does that amount to? Why, that punch-bowl alone was worth a fortune."

"What a wonderful story!" exclaimed Old Grannis, never for an instant doubting its truth. "And it's all lost now, you say?"

"Lost, lost," repeated Maria.

"Tut, tut! What a pity! What a pity!"

Suddenly the agent rose and broke out with:

"Well, I must be going, if I'm to get any car."

He shook hands with everybody, offered a parting cigar to Marcus, congratulated McTeague and Trina a last time, and bowed himself out.

"What an elegant gentleman," commented Miss Baker.

"Ah," said Marcus, nodding his head, "there's a man of the world for you. Right on to himself, by damn!"

The company broke up.

"Come along, Mac," cried Marcus; "we're to sleep with the dogs to-night, you know."

The two friends said "Good-night" all around and departed for the little dog hospital.

Old Grannis hurried to his room furtively, terrified lest he should again be brought face to face with Miss Baker. He bolted himself in and listened until he heard her foot in the hall and the soft closing of her door. She was there close beside him; as one might say, in the same room; for he, too, had made the discovery as to the similarity of the wallpaper. At long intervals he could hear a faint rustling as she moved about. What an evening that had been for him! He had met her, had spoken to her, had touched her hand; he was in a tremor of excitement. In a like manner the little old dressmaker listened and quivered. HE was there in that same room which they shared in common, separated only by the thinnest board partition. He was thinking of her, she was almost sure of it. They were strangers no longer; they were acquaintances, friends. What an event that evening had been in their lives!

Late as it was, Miss Baker brewed a cup of tea and sat down in her rocking chair close to the partition; she rocked gently, sipping her tea, calming herself after the emotions of that wonderful evening.

Old Grannis heard the clinking of the tea things and smelt the faint odor of the tea. It seemed to him a signal, an invitation. He drew his chair close to his side of the partition, before his work-table. A pile of half-bound "Nations" was in the little binding apparatus; he threaded his huge upholsterer's needle with stout twine and set to work.

It was their tete-a-tete. Instinctively they felt each other's presence, felt each other's thought coming to them through the thin partition. It was charming; they were perfectly happy. There in the stillness that settled over the flat in the half hour after midnight the two old people "kept company," enjoying after their fashion their little romance that had come so late into the lives of each.

On the way to her room in the garret Maria Macapa paused under the single gas-jet that burned at the top of the well of the staircase; she assured herself that she was alone, and then drew from her pocket one of McTeague's "tapes" of non-cohesive gold. It was the most valuable steal she had ever yet made in the dentist's "Parlors." She told herself that it was worth at least a couple of dollars. Suddenly an idea occurred to her, and she went hastily to a window at the end of the hall, and, shading her face with both hands, looked down into the little alley just back of the flat. On some nights Zerkow, the red-headed Polish Jew, sat up late, taking account of the week's ragpicking. There was a dim light in his window now.

Maria went to her room, threw a shawl around her head, and descended into the little back yard of the flat by the back stairs. As she let herself out of the back gate into the alley, Alexander, Marcus's Irish setter, woke suddenly with a gruff bark. The collie who lived on the other side of the fence, in the back yard of the branch post-office, answered with a snarl. Then in an instant the endless feud between the two dogs was resumed. They dragged their respective kennels to the fence, and through the cracks raged at each other in a frenzy of hate; their teeth snapped and gleamed; the hackles on their backs rose and stiffened. Their hideous clamor could have been heard for blocks around. What a massacre should the two ever meet!

Meanwhile, Maria was knocking at Zerkow's miserable hovel.

"Who is it? Who is it?" cried the rag-picker from within, in his hoarse voice, that was half whisper, starting nervously, and sweeping a handful of silver into his drawer.

"It's me, Maria Macapa;" then in a lower voice, and as if speaking to herself, "had a flying squirrel an' let him go."

"Ah, Maria," cried Zerkow, obsequiously opening the door. "Come in, come in, my girl; you're always welcome, even as late as this. No junk, hey? But you're welcome for all that. You'll have a drink, won't you?" He led her into his back room and got down the whiskey bottle and the broken red tumbler.

After the two had drunk together Maria produced the gold "tape." Zerkow's eyes glittered on the instant. The sight of gold invariably sent a qualm all through him; try as he would, he could not repress it. His fingers trembled and clawed at his mouth; his breath grew short.

"Ah, ah, ah!" he exclaimed, "give it here, give it here; give it to me, Maria. That's a good girl, come give it to me."

They haggled as usual over the price, but to-night Maria was too excited over other matters to spend much time in bickering over a few cents.

"Look here, Zerkow," she said as soon as the transfer was made, "I got something to tell you. A little while ago I sold a lottery ticket to a girl at the flat;

the drawing was in this evening's papers. How much do you suppose that girl has won?"

"I don't know. How much? How much?"

"Five thousand dollars."

It was as though a knife had been run through the Jew; a spasm of an almost physical pain twisted his face -- his entire body. He raised his clenched fists into the air, his eyes shut, his teeth gnawing his lip.

"Five thousand dollars," he whispered; "five thousand dollars. For what? For nothing, for simply buying a ticket; and I have worked so hard for it, so hard, so hard. Five thousand dollars, five thousand dollars. Oh, why couldn't it have come to me?" he cried, his voice choking, the tears starting to his eyes; "why couldn't it have come to me? To come so close, so close, and yet to miss me -- me who have worked for it, fought for it, starved for it, am dying for it every day. Think of it, Maria, five thousand dollars, all bright, heavy pieces -- -- "

"Bright as a sunset," interrupted Maria, her chin propped on her hands. "Such a glory, and heavy. Yes, every piece was heavy, and it was all you could do to lift the punch-bowl. Why, that punch-bowl was worth a fortune alone -- -- "

"And it rang when you hit it with your knuckles, didn't it?" prompted Zerkow, eagerly, his lips trembling, his fingers hooking themselves into claws.

"Sweeter'n any church bell," continued Maria.

"Go on, go on, go on," cried Zerkow, drawing his chair closer, and shutting his eyes in ecstasy.

"There were more than a hundred pieces, and every one of them gold -- -- "

"Ah, every one of them gold."

"You should have seen the sight when the leather trunk was opened. There wa'n't a piece that was so much as scratched; every one was like a mirror, smooth and bright, polished so that it looked black -- you know how I mean."

"Oh, I know, I know," cried Zerkow, moistening his lips.

Then he plied her with questions -- questions that covered every detail of that service of plate. It was soft, wasn't it? You could bite into a plate and leave a dent? The handles of the knives, now, were they gold, too? All the knife was made from one piece of gold, was it? And the forks the same? The interior of the trunk was quilted, of course? Did Maria ever polish the plates herself? When the company ate off this service, it must have made a fine noise -- these gold knives and forks clinking together upon these gold plates.

"Now, let's have it all over again, Maria," pleaded Zerkow. "Begin now with 'There were more than a hundred pieces, and every one of them gold.' Go on, begin, begin, begin!"

The red-headed Pole was in a fever of excitement. Maria's recital had become a veritable mania with him. As he listened, with closed eyes and

trembling lips, he fancied he could see that wonderful plate before him, there on the table, under his eyes, under his hand, ponderous, massive, gleaming. He tormented Maria into a second repetition of the story -- into a third. The more his mind dwelt upon it, the sharper grew his desire. Then, with Maria's refusal to continue the tale, came the reaction. Zerkow awoke as from some ravishing dream. The plate was gone, was irretrievably lost. There was nothing in that miserable room but grimy rags and rust-corroded iron. What torment! what agony! to be so near -- so near, to see it in one's distorted fancy as plain as in a mirror. To know every individual piece as an old friend; to feel its weight; to be dazzled by its glitter; to call it one's own, own; to have it to oneself, hugged to the breast; and then to start, to wake, to come down to the horrible reality.

"And you, YOU had it once," gasped Zerkow, clawing at her arm; "you had it once, all your own. Think of it, and now it's gone."

"Gone for good and all."

"Perhaps it's buried near your old place somewhere."

"It's gone -- gone -- gone," chanted Maria in a monotone.

Zerkow dug his nails into his scalp, tearing at his red hair.

"Yes, yes, it's gone, it's gone -- lost forever! Lost forever!"

Marcus and the dentist walked up the silent street and reached the little dog hospital. They had hardly spoken on the way. McTeague's brain was in a whirl; speech failed him. He was busy thinking of the great thing that had happened that night, and was trying to realize what its effect would be upon his life -- his life and Trina's. As soon as they had found themselves in the street, Marcus had relapsed at once to a sullen silence, which McTeague was too abstracted to notice.

They entered the tiny office of the hospital with its red carpet, its gas stove, and its colored prints of famous dogs hanging against the walls. In one corner stood the iron bed which they were to occupy.

"You go on an' get to bed, Mac," observed Marcus. "I'll take a look at the dogs before I turn in."

He went outside and passed along into the yard, that was bounded on three sides by pens where the dogs were kept. A bull terrier dying of gastritis recognized him and began to whimper feebly.

Marcus paid no attention to the dogs. For the first time that evening he was alone and could give vent to his thoughts. He took a couple of turns up and down the yard, then suddenly in a low voice exclaimed:

"You fool, you fool, Marcus Schouler! If you'd kept Trina you'd have had that money. You might have had it yourself. You've thrown away your chance in life -- to give up the girl, yes -- but this," he stamped his foot with rage -- "to throw five thousand dollars out of the window -- to stuff it into the pockets of someone else, when it might have been yours, when you might have had Trina

AND the money -- and all for what? Because we were pals . Oh, 'pals' is all right -- but five thousand dollars -- to have played it right into his hands -- God DAMN the luck!"

TO BE CONTINUED IN NEXT ISSUE

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The Back Alley is a webzine devoted to the hardboiled and noir genres of popular fiction. We welcome submissions of stories which fall within the guidelines of these genres, and historical/critical/analytical nonfiction related to these genres.

The discussion, even among those who are well-read in these literary forms, surrounding just what constitutes hardboiled or noir fiction is ongoing, often confrontational, and seldom results in anything resembling agreement.

Basically, hardboiled crime fiction involves a stronger description of violence, sex, and contains harsher language than you might find in traditional crime fiction. The protagonist more often than not is a private investigator. This investigator may fall under the tradition of Chandler's Marlowe and his successors such as Lew Archer and Spenser, in which the crimes are vicious but the detectives are not. They may more closely resemble the work of Carroll John Daly or Mickey Spillane, where the detective is as likely to engage in violence as the criminals are.

Noir stories often defy description, except that you are aware from the beginning that the protagonist and those around him are probably doomed no matter what they do to prevent it. The source of their damnation is their own personal weaknesses and frailties. They give in to temptation and, as in the story of Adam and Eve, their own choices condemn them. Greed, avarice, lust, and envy figure heavily in noir stories. Often, the noir protagonist believes him(her)self to be virtuous or to be acting correctly. It is only later that they discover that their decisions - well-meaning or not - have led to their undoing.

There is an ongoing discussion on the Rara Avis list regarding the nature of hardboiled versus noir literature. Jim Doherty has stated that "*...hard-boiled describes an attitude that's tough and colloquial, while noir describes an atmosphere that's dark and gloomy*".

In response, Jack Bludis, in an attempt to take the two genres down to their bare essentials, has asserted that "*hardboiled = tough; noir = screwed*".

More often than not, the discussion comes down to an uneasy truce based on a statement something like, "*Well, I know it when I see it.*"

Which, when all is said and done, will also be the reasoning we will employ when deciding whether to accept a story for. **The Back Alley**.

Since I have failed so miserably at describing exactly what hardboiled and noir fiction is, I would like to take a moment to describe exactly what it is not.

We do not want to see any story involving a cat, talking or otherwise, unless the cat is dead by the end of the story. We love cats, have a bunch of them ourselves. They have no place in hardboiled stories, especially if they talk, think, reason, or engage in any other behavior than eating, sleeping, and licking their butts. Don't submit cat mysteries. We will reject them and then post ugly comments about your mama.

If there is an 'Inspector' in your story, there had also better damned well be some rats, roaches or other vermin. We will consider making an exception for building inspectors, but only if they are brutally victimized. If you have ever built a house, you know why.

If Aunt Lucy is solving the crime, she had better also have some prison tats, drink like Foster Brooks, and spray the bad guys with an Uzi. The only tea I want to read about in these stories is Mexican pot.

We are open to foul language, substance abuse, graphic and frequent violence, and sex. If you don't know how to write sex, don't submit any. Most people don't know how to write it. If your early writing career was spent typing with one hand, feel free to toss in a little of the ol' wokka-wokka. If it's embarrassing, we'll ask you to cut it.

We don't want to read international thrillers, gaslight armchair detectives, kung-fu adventures, serial killer stories, forensic procedurals, police procedurals, courtroom procedurals, or medical mysteries. We do not want to read anything that takes place more than ten years in the future. We do not want to read anything that takes place more than one hundred years in the past.

If you are still in doubt, query.

Okay, as to the mechanics: We are looking for stories up to 10,000 words. We will entertain submissions that are longer, up to novella length, but query first. We are only accepting electronic submissions, because we are tree huggers and we don't like dealing with all that SASE crap.

Here is the procedure for submitting your story.

Format it in the standard method (one inch margins, double spaced, yada yada yada. If you don't know, consult Writers Digest or google it.). Save your story in RTF format. Close it to strip out all the weird but cool formatting like em dashes and smart quotes, and reopen it to assure yourself that you are not

going to offend us. Close it and attach it to an email. In the body of the email, write your query. Impress us. We like that.

Send the email to: BarHallCom@aol.com Slug your email *Back Alley Submission*.

Make some microwave popcorn. Pop open a cold one. Wait a while. Weeks, maybe. We have day jobs.

Eventually, we will let you know what we think. Seems pretentious, considering that we're only paying twenty bucks or so a story, but we do care about the quality of the material we will publish in our webzine. We may ask you to edit your story, and if we do we will tell you what we would like changed. If you don't want to edit it, we're cool with that, but we won't publish it.

If we decide to publish your work, you lucky dog, we will send you two signed copies of the contract and an SASE. Sign them, and send ONE back. We will then issue checks for the story payment. Sounds convoluted, but it works for us.

We will be buying first serial rights only. Should we decide at some point in the future to publish a print anthology of stories originally published in **The Back Alley**, and to use your story in that anthology, we will contact you to offer to buy those rights separately. Please be aware that first periodical rights will include the right to include your stories in our archived editions of **The Back Alley**. However, our contract will state that you are free to sell reprint rights to your story elsewhere six months after initial publication.

Any other questions, query.

We're looking forward to reading the fruits of your genius.