TEXAS BY THE TAIL

Jim Thompson

1965
Lint-like threads of cigarette smoke cloyed around the four men, mingling with the faint fumes of very good whiskey, occasionally swarming away from them with the soft explosions of some very bad words. It was the night of the last day of Fort Worth's internationally known Rodeo and Fat Stock Show. The room was one of the hotel's best, a bargain—by its tenant's standards—at thirty dollars a day.

As the man next to him crapped out, Mitch Corley took out his wallet and peered into it deliberately through oldfashioned, steelrimmed spectacles. He was playing the rube here in Fort Worth, the big frog from a little puddle, the small-town rich man. He wore a ranch-style hat, an ill-fitting suit, and a pongee shirt with a string tie (and mannerisms to match). Glancing cautiously from his wallet to the three other men, he looked fifteen years older than his thirty-five.

"All right with you fellas," he said, "if I shoot two hundred?"

"Two hundred?" The red-faced drilling contractor groaned. "Jesus Christ, shoot two thousand if you want to!"

"Yeah, what the hell?" frowned the cattle buyer. "I thought you were a crapshooter, Pops. God knows you talk a big game!"

Mitch hesitated, letting their irritation mount, then slowly counted five twenties onto the bed. "Reckon I just better stick to a hundred," he said. "Don't feel so lucky tonight."

There was a chorus of groans and curses. With dogged patience, the lease dealer suggested that Mitch might do well to pull out. "I reckon the game's a little too fast for you, Corley. Maybe you better go back to Pancake Junction or wherever you came from, and match pennies with the mayor."

"Now, don't you go a-pokin' fun at me," Mitch grumbled. "I done lost three hundred dollars tonight, an' I aim to get it back."

"Then, shoot for Christ's sake! Crap or get off the hole!"

Mitch said that he "was" going to shoot, and he was going to make it two hundred after all. He again opened his wallet, glancing at his watch as he counted out another hundred. Almost eight minutes yet: eight minutes before the payoff and the take-out. He would have to stall a little.

Clumsily picking up the two dice, he let one fall to the floor. That took care of a minute, in all, which left him approximately seven more to kill. Again—for the third time, now—he took out his wallet.

"Holy God!" The drilling contractor slapped his forehead. "What now?"

"I'm goin' to shoot another hundred, that's what! You think I'm a piker, I'll show you."

"Shoot it! Shoot five hundred, if you want to!"

"I reckon you think I won't." Mitch glared at him crankily. "I reckon you think I ain't got five hundred."

"Pops," the cattle buyer said warily. "For God's sake, Pops."

"All right!" Mitch slammed more bills onto the bed. "'m shootin' five hundred!"

He picked up the dice, setting them with an invisible movement of his fingers; fixing them to the necessary position. He ratted them—or appeared to. Actually, the dice remained set: he was only clicking one against the other. He threw them with feigned awkwardness.

The red cubes spun down on the bed's tightly stretched blanket. Came up on a six and an ace.

"The man sevened," intoned the lease dealer. "Want to shoot it all, Corley?"

"You mean a whole thousand? A whole thousand dollars?"

"Goddammit!" The contractor hurled his hat across the room. "Shoot something! Shoot or pass the dice!"

Mitch went for the grand. He came out with a six-five. He was taunted and jeered and cursed into going for the two thousand.

"Why not? You're shooting with our money!"

"All right, by gosh! I'll do it!"

He spun the dice out again. A four-trey faced up on the blanket. As the others groaned, he reached for the money.

"I reckon I just better shoot a hundred this time," he said. "Or maybe just fifty. If that's all right with you fellas."
It was damned well not all right with the fellas, and they made him know it. The hell he'd drop the bet to peanuts while he held a bale of their money!

"But four thousand dollars," Mitch protested. "'Four thousand dollars!'"

"You're covered," the cattle buyer said coldly. "Shoot!"

"Well, all right," Mitch said nervously. "All right, dang it!"

He rubbed his hand against his pantleg, wiping the sweat from it before picking up the dice. His nervousness was not entirely feigned. Once, even with the best of surgeons, the scalpel may slip. Once the most skilled of knife-throwers may throw a little too close. Once—only once—the high-wire walker may misstep to eternity. So with the dice handler.

No amount of skill or practice is completely impregnable to luck. There is no statute of limitations on the law of averages.

Two minutes to go. Eight thousand dollars on the bed. Just about all they were carrying, Mitch guessed. Certainly all that it was safe to take away from a group like this. And the taking would have to look very good. No sevens or elevens this time. Nothing that a square might do legitimately. An Honest John might make seven or eight straight passes in a row, but a hustler had to play it cute.

He clicked the dice. He threw them awkwardly. Then stood chagrined as the others snorted with laughter.

"Up jumped the devil! You got a big four, Pops."

"Now, god-dang," Mitch whimpered. "God-dang it, anyways!"

"Want to bet a little more, Corley? Give you six to five."

"Danged if you won't," Mitch grumbled; and they laughed again.

Joe, of course, is the lowest point on the dice. Above it are Phoebe Five (a hard gal to know), Easy Six (three combinations), Craps (three), Eighter-Decatur (three), Quinine (a bitter two), Big Dick (two) and the fielders, Heaven-eleven and Boxcars, which have no bearing after the initial roll. The theoretical odds against five and nine are approximately three to two, as opposed to six to five for six and eight. The odds are two to one against ten and four, but any crapshooter will swear that ten is an easier point to make.

Obviously, Little Four has little going for him. As if recognizing the fact, he normally stays out of sight after showing his luckless little face.

"Roll 'em, Pops! Let's see some craps!"

"Don't rush me," Mitch whined. "I'm rollin' these here dice!"

He threw them. A big ten ("four on the bottom"). He threw again—nine. Then, eight and five and six. "Where the hell was Red? What the hell was she waiting on?" With so much riding, these guys could be hard to handle. He was getting tense, and tension was hell on control, and—

There it was! The signal. The muted, familiar cough, coming from just outside the door. It went unheard by the others, lost in their own noise.

"Seven dice! Let's see a six-ace!"

"Come on, Pops! What the hell you waitin' for?"

"Give me time, dang it! Stop rushin' me!"

He wiped his hand against his pantleg again. He picked up the dice, set them, clicked them. And threw.

Nerves whispered that it was a bad throw. Screamed silently that he'd goofed off a week's careful finagling and a wad of expense money in one bad moment.

He watched hopelessly as the cubes spun across the blanket, seeming to spin forever and ever. An eternity—a split second. They turned over twice in unison. Stopped with an imperceptible backspin.

Two deuces peeked up from the blanket.

He watched hopelessly as the cubes spun across the blanket, seeming to spin forever and ever. An eternity—a split second. They turned over twice in unison. Stopped with an imperceptible backspin.

Before the three men could react, there was a sudden furious banging on the door. They turned toward it automatically, and Mitch swept up the money and stuffed it into his pockets.

It was the contractor's room. With a curse, he strode to the door and yanked it open. "Now, what the goddam hell—?"

"Wh- at? "What!" Don't you curse me, you—you "thing!""
Red stormed into the room, giving the contractor a shove that sent him stumbling backward. Her angry gaze scorched the other two men, then settled witheringly on Mitch, who seemed to wilt beneath it.

"Uh-hah! There you are!" She allowed herself to see the dice. "And up to your old tricks again! You just wait until I tell papa! You just wait!"

"Aw, now, sis—" Mitch squirmed childishly. "These here fellas are just—"

"Bums, that's what they are! Just bums like you! Now, you march right out of here! "March!"

With her red hair, her white high-cheekboned face, she was every inch the termagant; obviously a dame to steer clear of. But there was a fidget of protest from the three losers. Mitch had almost all their money, and they were entitled to a chance to win it back. And the lady could see that for herself, couldn't she? And she could see that they weren't bums, either.

"I've got offices in Amarillo and Big Spring, and—"Ouch!" The contractor fell back, rubbing the side of his face.

Red ran at the other two, hands wickedly clawed. Voice rising, she threatened to scream. "I'll do it!" Her eyes blazed insanely. "I'll call the police!"

She threw back her head, mouth opened to its widest. Mitch grabbed her in the seeming nick of time.

"I'll go! I'm comin' right now, sis! Just you calm down, an'..." He urged her toward the door, grimacing over-the-shoulder apologies. "Sorry, fellas, but..."

But they could see how it was, couldn't they? What could you do with a crazy woman like this?

He closed the door on the dazed silence behind him. He and Red went swiftly down the hall to the elevator.

She had already checked them out of their rooms, of course, and a black-shirted porter stood waiting with their baggage at the side entrance of the hotel. As a cab sped them toward the railroad station, she moved close on the seat to whisper to him.

"I got us a stateroom together. Okay?"

"What?" He scowled in the darkness. "We're registered as brother and sister, and you—"

"Now, honey..." She was a little hurt. "I didn't get it through the hotel."

"You were late tonight."

"Me? Why, I don't see how I could have been."

"What difference does it make whether you see it?"

She moved away from him. It would take very little more to get her truly angry. Which would not be something to enjoy. But he was pretty burned up himself. She'd been late on the take-out, dammit, a whole two minutes late. He'd had to sweat, in danger of losing the dough and getting a schlamming, just because she couldn't be bothered to check the time. What the hell had she been doing, anyway? What was she—a woman with a kid's head?

Red said very quietly, "You'd better shut up, Mitch."

"But, goddammit, you were late! I don't mean to talk rough to you, honey, but—"

"And don't honey me!"

As they followed the' redcap to their train, he looked up at the station clock, then took a startled glance at his watch. Fast—by almost two minutes. So the mix-up was his fault. Red hadn't taken him out late, as he should have known. As he had known. But hustling the heavy scores kind of drained a man dry, and until he filled up again he didn't have anything but crap for anyone. Probably, Mitch supposed, it was that way with any big-time frammis, even the legitimate ones. At least, most of the big-timers he knew had screwed up personal lives. If you were willing to settle for some gig like working for the park department and saving tinfoil as a hobby, you could stay loose. But on the hard-hustle, uh-uh. No matter how much you had on the ball, there was still a limit to it. And if you blasted it off, you couldn't spread it out.

In their stateroom, with the roadbed whispering swiftly beneath them, his hunger for Red suddenly became a raging thing. And knowing that it was no use, he began a roundabout apology, mentioning acquaintances, real and imaginary, whom stress also made unreasonably unreasonable.

"There was my dad, God rest him...." He forced a reminiscent chuckle. "He was a special-editions promoter, you know; traveled around the country putting out special editions of newspapers. He'd run a boiler room all day, bossing a bunch of phone men and closing the tough babies himself, and by the time night came you could hardly
Mitch sighed, letting his voice trail away, silently cursing her for being as she was. He'd hardly said a thing to her — nothing at all compared to the guff he had to take from people. Yet apologies, coaxing, were obviously a waste of time.

She intended to stay sore; the well-stocked commissary of her flesh was closed until further notice. He was sure that she wanted him as badly as he wanted her. That was apparent from the single stateroom she had booked. But it was also apparent, from her manner of undressing, that she was prepared to make him suffer, and to hell with her own sufferings.

Normally, she was almost prudishly modest. Forced to undress in close quarters, she would do so under her nightgown, primly urging him not to peek as she worked out of her clothes. But when she didn't intend to let him have anything, then she put it all on display, everything that she wasn't going to let him have.

No pro could do a more tantalizing strip tease than an offended Red (right name Harriet, for God's sake!). She would pull her panties halfway down around her hips, casually turning this way and that to give him a glimpse of what could be glimpsed, fore and aft, with her panties pulled halfway down. Then, the brassiere was loosened, and the breasts carelessly allowed to come into view. Pink-tipped, traced through with fine blue veins—their abundance seeming to bow her frail-looking shoulders. (She damned well wasn't frail!) Then, if she was feeling particularly mean, she would lift them up and examine them, critically and lengthily, until his tongue felt as big as a ball bat.

She was very down on him tonight, so he got the breast bit in full. Then, disdainfully, she discarded the last wispy fragment of her underthings, and stood naked with her feet slightly apart, her head thrown back to let the red mass of hair spill down around her shoulders. She raised her hands and began to fluff it, her breasts moving delicately with the movements of her arms. Finally, she ducked her head forward, bringing her hair over her shoulders, letting it spread silkily over her breasts. It parted perfectly on either side of her beautifully shaped head, and at last she looked at him; the look of a wicked angel. And spoke to him huskily.

"How'd you like to have a little?"

Mitch knew it was strictly zilch. He said two words, one a personal pronoun and the other a very naughty verb. "Oh? Not even a teensy bit?" She measured an amount on her finger. "Not even a teensy-eensy-weensy bit?"

Mitch groaned and reached for her, surrendering.

Red said the same two words that he had said.

Then she hoisted herself into the upper berth and pulled the covers over her.

Eventually, Mitch fell asleep in the lower berth, dreaming not of Red, strangely, but of his father. Dreaming that the old man was sore at the statement that he was a hard guy to get along with. He wasn't at all unreasonable, his father said. Not a goddamned bit.

And he certainly wasn't. All things considered...
There was almost no time of complete relaxation in the life of Mr. Corley, Sr. If he was not driving a crew of high-powered telephone salesmen—and doing twice the work of any two of them—then he was "working advance," attempting to line up a publisher for the special-edition routine. And here was a job to make the saintliest of men curse with frustration.

They were invariably hard-heads, those publishers: chronic cynics with a talent for poking holes in the smoothest promotional pitch. Mitch knew, because he and his mother—peppery, nervous, fast-talking—usually accompanied his father on the initial visit to the publisher. Mr. Corley wanted them along (or so he explained to the publisher) to show him the kind of folks who were coming into his community. "No fly-by-nights, sir. Just a plain old-fashioned American family". This last was Mitch's signal to grab the guy's hand, winsomely inquiring whether he had any little boys. Then stepping aside quickly, he allowed his mother to move in. And she practically straddled the guy, pushing herself right up against him as she gushed out a torrent of flattery. And then, before the chump could run and hide (yes, some of them actually tried to do that), Mr. Corley drove in for the sell.

He was a hard man to say no to, although it was said to him three times out of five. The points he made were not only virtually irrefutable, but put forth with mannerisms which were almost mesmeric.

He would not let a prospect look away from him. If one tried to, alarmed by the purring, pounding, perfectly enunciating voice, Corley would shift in his chair, assuming whatever position was necessary—bending practically to the floor if he had to—until he again had the man's eye. Then, his own gaze unblinking, he would begin an imperceptible wagging of his head, moving it with the rhythm of his words; back and forth, talking steadily all the time, "wag-word", "wag-word", to and fro, to and fro. And Mitch, until he learned to look away—to cut off the sight and sound of his father—would feel his eyes glazing and a strange numbness creeping over him.

For that matter, he did not need to look or listen to follow the pitch. It was pretty well standardized, the gradually puttogether product of years of attack and counter-attack on the same general issues.

"Why, certainly, sir," Mr. Corley would say. "Certainly, you could put out a special edition yourself. You could make yourself a suit of clothes, too, I suppose, or build your own house. But you don't do those things; you "don't" do them, because you're not an expert at them. And you know and I know and we all know that when you want something done right, you go to an expert...."

Or knocking down another sore point:

"I'm glad you mentioned that, sir. Glad. Very glad. It's quite true that some advertising departments can't sell an inch of space behind a special edition. They've had it for a year afterward. Their explanation is that there's just so much ad money in a town, and if you take it out on a special, you can't get it day-to-day. Oh, yes, I've seen advertising departments like that—alibi departments, I call them. And I've seen publishers who let them get away with it. Soft-headed types, you know: men who ought to be running a soup kitchen instead of a newspaper. But if you "were" that type, as of course you're not, and if you "did" have that kind of advertising department, you'd still be ahead with a special. You've got it made in a wad, instead of having it spread over a year and..."

And still another:

"Why, that's wonderful, sir. Just about makes you unique. All the business you can handle, all you need. So much that you're not even interested in a time-tried and proved proposition which has earned the whole-hearted endorsement of almost two hundred daily newspapers. My congratulations, sir. I can only hope that some of my less fortunate publisher friends don't move in on your bonanza. Now, I was talking to a man just last week who was looking for another location...."

And so on and so on.

Some towns did not have to be promoted after the first time. They were sold solid and would go for a special every year or, more often, every two years. But this seemed only to increase the pace. There was lost time to make up for, hard times to be anticipated. And there were arrangements to make, the chiefest of which was the rounding up of personnel, the professional high-pressure salesmen who made up the special-edition breed.

When working, some of them made several thousand a month. When not working, which was about two-thirds of the time, they made for the nearest big city, there to live it up with booze and broads until they were broke and Corley or someone like him made contact. Often, Corley would send them money, never to see either it or them again. Often, they would arrive more fit for a hospital than work. Eventually, however, a crew would be put
together, and things would start to jump.

On an average, there were from six to a dozen salesmen, depending on the size of the town. Headquarters was any empty storeroom which could be rented cheaply: the furniture—boxes, packing crates and telephones. You had only to stick your head in the door to know why it was called a boiler room. You had only to listen to the constant clamor of the phones, the muted incessant roar of fast-talking voices, to understand the cursing, the chain-smoking, the opened bottles of whiskey convenient to every man's hand. Yet they seemed to enjoy what they were doing. They were all savagely goodnatured.

In mid-conversation, a man would swiftly thrust his phone at Mitch. "Want to piss in this guy's ear, kid?" Or covering the mouthpiece of his phone a moment, "Well, crap on you, Cicero!" Sometimes there would be a screw-up, and top-of-the-head apologies were necessary. "Oh, no, madam, that isn't at all what I said! You see, we have a very elderly gentleman here in the office who is taking a trip around the world—we fellows are sending him, as a matter of fact—and he was wondering which was the cheapest way to go. So I said, Oh, ship—s-h-i-p"...."

There was laughter, excitement. The sense of great things afoot, of vast sums pouring in. Of magic doors to be swung open by the quick and the glib. But being so close to his parents' affairs, Mitch knew that what he saw here was only the shadow and not the substance; the perilous periphery of the big time. Minds and bodies were being bet in a fixed race. You might beat it, sure, and you might also become rich by saving a dollar a day for a million days.

Mr. Corley strode in and out of the boiler room a dozen times a day, but mostly worked outside. His wife, Helen — Dutch (for Duchess) as she was usually called—worked the inside; keeping track of sales, occasionally taking over a phone, frequently circulating the room to see that nothing or no one got too far out of hand.

Although she was a small woman, her clothes never seemed quite large enough for her. Her round little rear-end was always molded against her skirt, her full little bosom strained constantly against her blouse. She moved around the room pepperily, her voice snappish, her quick movements making her jounce all over. Now and then, she leaned down, her hand resting impersonally ("impersonally?") on a guy's shoulder as she lit her cigarette from his or listened in on a call. Occasionally, needing to get off her feet for a moment (or so she said), she sat down next to a guy, butting him over on his packing-box chair with a waspish little fling of her hips.

All day, day after day, the men were her life. All day, day after day, there was the salty talk of men, the rousing sight of men, the harsh-sweet smell of men, the roughly tender feel of men. And then at night, in the in-itself-suggestive hotel room, where even the towels and toilet, the thick tubes of the bedstead, the dangling knob of the chandelier, the table legs—where everything achieved a phallic symbolism—there were no longer any men. There was no man.

Corley and his wife played different roles, but essentially they shared the same life. Yet draining him dry, it simultaneously replenished her. Everything that had been taken from him seemed to have been given to her. And late at night, with Mitch supposedly asleep in the connecting room, they quarreled furiously and fruitlessly.

""Dutch, for Christ's sake..."

""Answer me, damn you! Do you know what this thing's for? Do you know what you're supposed to do with it?"

""Aah, honey..."

""No! No, by God! Don't you love me up unless you're going to go all the way!"

""Dutch, it's this goddamned life! The first good spot I see we'll settle down."

""Balls! What's wrong with this life, anyway?"

""I mean it! I'm taking a regular job!"

""Oh, lay off, for shit's sake! Selling sand on the Sahara—that's a regular job I see you in!"

It was probably true. In the rarefied atmosphere of the fast buck, Corley was slowly strangling, his lungs gradually robbed of elasticity. Yet he knew himself completely incompatible to the valleys, the world below his slippery mountain top. Even as a young man he could not adapt to it, and he was now very far from young.

Mitch changed schools every two months on an average. Being bright and personable, as well as transient, he escaped the authoritative attention which the regular and less-favored students received. After all, he would be moving on in a few weeks. After all, he was well-mannered and smart—far ahead of his grade in some respects. Why bother then, why make things harder for him than they doubtless already were, if he made only token obeisance to curriculum and routine?

That was the way things went until he was in his second year of high school. Then, at last there was a crackdown—a truant officer caught him in an all-day burlesque house—and his derelictions were laid before his parents. They
responded typically.

His mother made a dash at him, and jerked him vigorously by the shoulders. She said he needed his little backside blistered and she was just the gal to do it.

His father said a kid's brains weren't in his butt, and the thing to do was reason.

"Now, I want to ask you something, boy," he said, pulling Mitch around in front of him. "I want to ask you something— look at me, boy! I want to ask you just one goddamned question. What do you want to do with your life, boy?"— "wag, wag"—"what do you want to do with your life? Do you want to get yourself a good education?"—"wag, wag"—"a good education, boy, or do you want to be a jerk? It's up to you, boy, strictly up to you. You can have an easy chair or a broom, boy. You can loll back in that easy chair in a fine, big office, with a pretty little gal like your mama for a secretary; you can do that, boy,"—"wag, wag"—"or you can take the broom, and go along the gutter sweeping up horse turds. Now, what's it going to be?"

Mitch made the indicated response. Over his mother's furious protest, his father handed him a fifty-dollar bill. "That represents education, boy. Education is money, money is security. You've learned something here today, boy, and it's already put money in your pocket."

Mitch promptly lost the fifty in a crap game in the bellboys' locker room. Dutch's reaction was typical. Ditto, her husband's."

"Now, goddammit, boy, maybe your brains are in your butt, after all! Goddammit, that old broomhandle's reaching for you already! Boy, boy,"—"wag, wag"—"don't you know there are people who can handle dice? Don't you know there are people who've "educated" themselves to make the dice behave?"

"Well... there wasn't anyone like that in the locker room."

"You don't know that, boy, you don't "know" it. Because you don't "know" a goddamned thing about dice, and you've just proved it. I say you proved it!"—"wag, wag". "You can't see to hit the pot, and you've peed all over your own feet. So you'd better squat on it, boy, squat on that pot! Play it safe or hold your pee until you can find the light switch of education. Otherwise, I fear for you, boy,"—"wag, wag". "I say I fear for you. The shadow of the broom is hanging over you, and I can smell those horse turds already."

Mr. Corley died during Mitch's last year of high school. Mrs. Corley shook her son furiously, hugged him frantically, wept wildly and calmly had the body cremated. Back at the hotel, she studied her mirrored reflection for a long time, at last anxiously asking Mitch if he thought she looked to be forty-two.

Mitch thought a little lightness was in order. He said she didn't look forty-two—not a day over forty-one and ninetenths.

Dutch burst into tears again, looked around for something to throw at him. "What a lousy thing to say! And your poor father lying cold in his grave!"

"You mean hot in his jar, don't you? All right, all right,"— dodging hastily. "Sure, you don't look forty-one, nothing like it. You could pass for thirty-four or -five any day."

"Honest? You're not just saying that?" Her face cleared, then clouded again. "But what am I going to do, for God's sake? I can't work alone. I'll have to hook up with another guy, and how the hell can I do that with you on my hands?"

"Gee," said Mitch, "maybe I'd better jump out a window."

"Now, honey. But you do have your school to finish, and God only knows where I'll be lighting next. It's going to take some time to make the right kind of tie-up—I don't mean marriage, of course—"

"Of course."

"Will you shut up? You're so smart, "you" think of something instead of bugging me all the time!"

Mitch shrugged. He suggested that he stay right here where he was, and she could do as she pleased. They were old customers of the hotel, on friendly terms with the management. And hotels had many jobs for presentable youths. Surely, they could give him some kind of part-time work, something that would allow him to finish his school term.

"Wonderful! Oh, that's marvelous, darling!" She clapped her hands together. "Why don't you see about it right away?"

It was almost five years from that day before he saw her again. Five years—and she had remarried, and he had married. He was still married, Red's belief to the contrary. "Still married, still married"...
In his sleep, Mitch stirred uneasily. The words, the ever-present threat of his mind, whispered voicelessly with the clicking of the rails. If Red found out, if she ever found out that their supposedly loaded safe-deposit box was virtually empty...

"She'll kill you, she'll kill you. Red's the gal to kill you"....
Houston.
The Blackest Land, The Whitest People...
Where You Never Meet A Stranger.

They say that as Texas sloped to the south, the cream of its population was drained off into Houston. They say
that Houston does what other cities talk about doing—and never, never talks about it. One does not flaunt his wealth
here. One makes his multi-million-dollar gifts to universities and philanthropic foundations—if he has it, he is
expected to—and shuns the publicity ordinarily accruing from such largesse.

Houston is south, you see, and it cherishes all that is best of the south. Gallantry, generosity, hospitality. Forth
Worth is west and Dallas is east and Houston is south. And don't you ever forget that it is south!

The whitest people (it says here). Where you never meet a stranger (it says here). But don't ever forget that word
"white"—particularly if the adjective doesn't fit you...

Red still had the frost on the next morning as they stepped down from the train at Houston, a striking-looking
pair who left a wake of envious and admiring glances behind them. The trim, handsomely tailored man, jauntily
distinguished with the touch of gray at his temples. The impeccably dressed woman, regal with her high-held red
head, her square little shoulders trailing an improbable length of silvery sable.

Her gloved hand rested on Mitch's arm as a matter of course—she detested public breaches of etiquette. But it
was purely a formality. Her occasional smile went no further than her lips; there was bare politeness in her reponses
to his remarks.

Mitch knew it was time for drastic measures. Otherwise, her anger allowed to deepen, Red might easily turn
drastic herself.

Reaching the interior of the station, he excused himself and signaled the redcap to wait. Then, he entered a phone
booth, and opened the directory. He was in the booth for quite a while. Red was obviously puzzled and irritated by
the delay, but of course she said nothing.

Not until they had been in the cab for several minutes and she suddenly became aware of its direction, did she
turn to him.

"What's this? I thought we had reservations downtown."

"I cancelled them. We're checking in at a hotel-apartment for a month." Mitch dropped his voice, glancing
meaningfully at the driver. "We need to be together for a while, Red. Some place where being together won't seem
out of line."

"We were together last night, remember?"

"I know, and I'm sorry, dear. Terribly, terribly sorry. Please forgive me, won't you?"

"I'll think about it. Keep asking me for a few years."

Mitch took her hand. She pulled it away, but not until he had held it for a moment or two. So she was melting a
little. He went on talking to her, pressing his advantage.

"I know a month's a long time in one place. But we can both use a rest. The Fat Stock show in Fort Worth
coming right after that convention in Mineral Wells..."

"I can take it. I'm not the one who's blowing my top all the time."

"I know. But, anyway, I thought we might rent us a car while we're here. It's only about a hundred and fifty miles
to the school, and we could drive over and see the boy."

"Big deal! I should care about seeing your kid."

Mitch repressed a smile. She was nuts about his son. There was a moment of silence, while Red somehow moved
a little closer to him. Then, with vast indifference, she asked how soon they could see the boy.

"I mean," she amended hastily, "when do we have to?"

Mitch laughed fondly. He told her that they could and would do anything she wanted to any time she wanted to,
and they would never do anything she did not want to do.

Red said they would go tomorrow, in that case. Then, barely whispering, a lovely blush suffusing her paleness, "I
suspect we'll be pretty busy today."

Her hand gripped his convulsively.

Hand in hand, they arrived at their destination.

Mitch registered for them in the usual manner, Mr. and Miss Corley: Once you started a thing like that you were stuck with it to the end. Since they were taking the place by the month, the rent was payable in advance. Mitch paid it, adding on another thousand as a credit—an amount certain to be used up in charges long before the month was out. Ever so faintly worried, he turned away from the desk and joined Red at the elevator.

Of course, there were still a few bills in the safe-deposit box; a little better than three grand, probably. But even so, he was very low on money, almost dangerously low by the standards of the big-time hustler. Even without splurges like the present one, the overhead for Red and himself—travel, payoffs, everything—was conservatively fifty thousand a year. And he had other expenses, his son's among them, besides Red's and his own.

With that kind of money pouring out, with the necessity to be able to bet big and to absorb the rare but inevitable losses, wisdom demanded a bankroll of at least twenty thousand dollars. Now, including the dough in the deposit, he had barely half that.

Something would have to break fast, he told himself. Something "would" break fast. Houston was a hell of a town. All the money in the world was here... well, most of it, anyway... and the people were wonderful.

Confidently, with Red's incredible body brushing against him, he stepped out of the elevator and into their apartment.

Red suppressed a gasp when she saw it. The bellboys had hardly departed before she had her arms around him, hugging him with fierce, half-fearful delight.

"Oh, my God, honey! What have you done?"

"Like it?"

"Like it!" B-But—I'm afraid to ask what it cost."

"Don't. Not unless you want to be called One-cheek Red."

"Mmm?"

"I mean I'll bite a big juicy chunk out of your tail."

Red laughed, blushed, and gave him a feverish kiss. Grabbing his hand, she began dragging him through the place. It was a penthouse with a three-sided view of the city. In the immense living room, with its ceiling-high fireplace, was a full-size grand piano, ivory finished to blend with the snowy white carpeting.

There were two bedrooms and a maid's room, three baths and a powder room. In the master bedroom, Red wheeled and put her arms around his waist, breasts shivering with excitement.

"Don't tell me," she begged. "I don't want to know how much. But—just a little hint?"

"Not half what it's worth to see you pleased.""

"You darling! I'm going to make it up to you today... for last night, I mean.""

"You couldn't be a little more specific?"

"Anything! You k-know?" Her body seemed to be on fire. ""Anything!"

"Big category," Mitch pointed out. "Little girl."

"You'll see. Now, about that hint..."

"We-el, a very well-known public figure is reputed to have stayed here."

"How well-known?"

"The well-knownest. The biggest."

His meaning suddenly sank in on her. "You mean the Pres—!" She put her hands against his chest and firmly pushed him away. "Out! Out right this minute! I want to get into something comfortable before I faint."

Mitch sat down in the living room and picked up a telephone. A parade of servants began to arrive: A maid (she went with the apartment and he was to ring whenever she was wanted); bellboys with morning papers, blooms for the flower vases, and an assortment of liquors for the bar; a waiter with breakfast.

Signing the various checks, with suitable tips penciled in, Mitch estimated that their total at about one hundred
and fifty dollars. He sighed, unconsciously. He summoned Red, now dressed in a form-fitting housecoat, and they went out on the terrace to breakfast.

Her hair blazed in the morning sun. Her skin seemed as delicately transparent as the porcelain cup that she lifted to her lips. She ate delicately, but enthusiastically, the food reacting like a tonic to her. Food did to her what drink did to other people. The brown eyes sparkled joyously; the highcheekboned face seemed to glow with contentment.

Mitch smiled, watching her. She smiled back at him, a little defensively.
"So I'm a pig. There wasn't too much food around when I was a kid."

"Do you remember our first meal together?"

Red pointed to her mouth: speech was impractical at the moment. She chewed, swallowed, and shuddered ecstatically. Then, she said of course she remembered, how could she ever forget a thing like that—adding casually that it was about five years ago, wasn't it?

Mitch laughed. "Stop trying to trap me. You know damned well it's over six years."

"Six years, three months, twelve days," she nodded, and smiled dreamily. "Wasn't it funny the way we met, dear? Strange, I mean."

"What was funny about it?" Mitch said. "I was looking for you."

"You mean you were looking for someone to work with."

"I mean I was looking for you," Mitch said.

And that was true.

But he hadn't known it until he'd seen her.

Red stood up abruptly, and silently held out her hands. Mitch took them and kissed them, then picked her up and carried her into the bedroom.
One of the world's worst trains—the absolute worst in the belief of many people—runs from Oklahoma City to Memphis. It has no diner. Its cars are of pre-World War I vintage, without airconditioning or other common comforts. Its schedule is presumably the product of a comic-book writer. The many and prolonged delays are variously attributed to such causes as holdups by Jesse James, impromptu hunting and fishing parties by the crew, and funerals for passengers who have advanced into and died en route of old age.

Most of those who ride it do so because they must. The occasional exceptions are usually sufferers from semantic insanity, interpreting discomfort as quaint and the insufferable as interesting. Mitch had boarded the train because it was the quickest connection out of Oklahoma City, and he needed to get away from the city fast.

He was feeling very despondent at the time, having just fired his assistant. He was afraid that if he lingered around her he might weaken and hire her back. Which would have been very bad for both of them.

She was a very good kid, in his book. A former model and bit-actress, she had enough class and looks for two women. She had, in fact, almost everything going for her but one thing—she was a sucker for the sauce. The weakness hadn't showed up for quite a while; probably it was the strain that brought it out. But there it was, and it kept getting worse.

Mitch talked to her like a father. He scolded her. Unhappily, he spanked her, pointing out that she should be ashamed to need such punishment at her age. Nothing did any good. She continued to louse him up, invariably getting drunk just when he needed her worst.

The realization came to him finally that she just couldn't help it, that if she was ever to get better it would not be around him.

So she wept heart-brokenly, and he got a little blurry-eyed himself. But there was only one thing to do, and he did it, and jumped town on the first thing he could grab.

He may have been very tired—he had been up with his ex-assistant for two nights running. Or he may have simply fled into sleep to escape the nightmare of the train. At any rate, it was around sunset when he returned to wakefulness and found this red-haired babe sitting next to him. Her duds were obviously discards from a rummage sale, and she was eating some horrible guck out of a paper sack.

She turned abruptly, looking at him out of the coolest, steadiest eyes he had ever seen. And suddenly he pieced those eyes and the hair and that complexion together with the rest of her, and he saw her as she could be. At the same time, he realized how he must look to her; unshaven, red-eyed, his suit rumpled, his shirt sweaty and soot-stained.

She added him up, item by item, and sympathy came into her face. "Eat something," she said, proffering the sack of guck. "You'll feel better."

Mitch said no, no, he was just fine; but Red knew he wasn't. Papa had been like that a lot, and he always felt better after mama gave him a cold sweet potato and some pone.

Mitch did a little nibbling. The conductor came through, taking orders for box lunches to be telegraphed ahead to the next stop. But the girl grabbed Mitch's hand as he started to reach for his wallet.

"They charge a dollar a piece for those things! You just save your money to get straightened out with!"

"But, really—"

"The idea! Throwing money away, and you with barely a stitch to your back!"

She was unaware, obviously, that baggage could be checked on one's ticket. Born and raised in a jerkwater community, a village dying with the cropped-out land around it, there was much that she did not know. But she did know, oh, how well she knew, a jobless propertyless drunk when she saw one.

"You'll feel better in the morning." She patted his hand. "Papa always does."

She went on talking, apparently trying to cheer him up with papa's unceasing miseries and the concomitant troubles of his family. Things had been pretty nice for a while, what with her two older brothers joining the army and sending home allotments. But they kind of had papa's talent for messing themselves up, and had soon messed themselves into death as a result of their own misconduct. So there was not only no more allotment money, but also none of the emoluments usually associated with service deaths.

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Of course, everyone at home worked when they could, chopping and picking for others as well as cropping their own. But when land wouldn't even make a quarter-bale an acre, well, where were you? Particularly where were you when you had a force ("family") the size of papa's?

"I worked in the library until they closed it down, and then the general store until it closed, and then the telephone exchange until it closed. There just wasn't any reason for them anymore, you know. Everyone was leaving who could. But papa was ailing again, and mama was pregnant again,"—"a note of bitterness, disgust?"—"and at least they have a house where they are, and..."

She, Red, had been elected to go to Memphis. To get a job immediately and promptly send some money home.

"And don't think I won't!" she declared, her chin jutting out. "Uh, what kind of work do you do—uh—"

"Mitch. Mitch for Mitchell. Do you mind being called Red?"

"Why should I? Uh, what kind of work did you say you did, Mitch?"

He decided to level with her; she seemed to be the kind you could do it with. "I'm a gambler."

"Oh? I guess you're not very good at it, are you?"

"What if I told you I was very good? That I had ways of winning almost all the time."

"I'd say you should," she said firmly. "If you can't win, you shouldn't play. But if you're so good, why—?"

He told her why briefly, giving her a glimpse of his bankroll by way of documentation. The reaction was not the one he had expected.

"So you were lying to me!" Her eyes flashed fire. "You sat right there and told me you'd got drunk and lost your job, and didn't even have enough to—"

"Why, no, I didn't. I didn't say anything."

"You did too! Just the same as! I tried to be nice, and you made a fool out of me!"

Mitch asked her if she wanted him to find another seat, and she tossed her head with a "Humph!" That was the way with liars, she said. First they lied to you, and then they ran.

"I could give you a job, Red," he persisted. "You'd make a great deal of money, and—"

"You hush up! I know the kind of job you'd give me!"

"No, really..."

"'Hush!'"

Mitch hushed. The train grew very cold with the coming of night, and he lowered the windows around them. Then, shrugging down in the seat, he tried to pull his coat across his chest.

Red primly opened her suitcase. Making a production out of it, she took out a bulky something and began tucking it around her. At last, settled back cozily, she shot a haughty glance at Mitch.

"You see?" she said. "You could be warm too if you hadn't lied to me."

"That's all right," Mitch said. "You need your blanket for yourself."

"'Blanket?' This is my coat, darn you!"

She flounced around in the seat, turning her back to him. There was a long moment of offended silence, and then she faced around to him, laughing.

"I guess it does look like a blanket, doesn't it? Here, come on and get under it."

"Well, yes and no," Mitch said. And Red gave him a reproving pinch.

"Mitch... did you mean it about the job?"

"Yes."

"It's, uh, kind of dishonest, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "It depends on your viewpoint, I guess."

"And—and you really think I could do it?"

"I think so." He hesitated carefully. "I could be wrong, but sizing people up is a big part of my business, and you seem to fit the bill. In any event you'd have to work very hard with me, get a lot of training before you were ready."
"Naturally," she nodded. "You have to work hard if you want to get any place in this world. Uh—about how much would I make, Mitch?"

"Twenty-five per cent of the take, after expenses. That could be a thousand or more a week, but there are a lot of weeks when you don't work."

She had one more question to ask, but she fumbled around it. She was afraid, she said, that he might get the wrong idea about her.

"I think I know what you have in mind," Mitch said. "The answer is no, not as far as I'm concerned. Those relationships can and do develop, but—"

"Hush!" she said, strangely cross. "I'm nineteen years old, for goodness sake! You don't have to spell everything out like I was some little kid."

"Sorry. What was it you wanted to ask?"

She told him, adding that he probably thought it was none of her business. Mitch said that he didn't think anything of the kind. She had every right to know if they were going to be working together, and he was more than glad to tell her.

Behind the deliberate words, his mind raced. He wanted to tell her the truth—but what was the truth? He hadn't heard from Teddy in years. Probably she had divorced him, or perhaps some public-spirited citizen had killed her. It hadn't mattered until now. Now it mattered a great deal.

If he wanted this redhead, and, his disclaimer to the contrary, he "did" want her, all the way, work and play, he could give her only one answer. He knew it—sensed it—just as he knew—sensed the potential treasure of her body and face and mind.

"No," he said, "I'm not married. I was married, and I have a small son in boarding school, but my wife is dead."

"Well, all right, then," Red said. "Now, you put your arms around me—no, this way, silly!—and we'll be real nice and warm."

"Just like we were in bed?"

"Hush," she said. "I'll let you know when I want you to get fresh with me."

In their penthouse bedroom, Red raised her arms to permit the removal of the housecoat, then, head bowed submissively, eyes half-closed, she went to the bed and spread herself upon it.

Mitch began flinging off his clothes. He had disposed of two shoes, one sock and a necktie when the door chimes sounded.
The youth entering hotel work may follow one of several courses. Since he is surrounded by many temptations in the form of women, drink and opportunities to steal, he is very often fired. But if he is able to behave himself (or to cover up his misbehavior), he normally has little trouble in (1) advancing to a responsible position, (2) not advancing—remaining a uniformed menial, or (3) using his hotel contacts to get good non-hotel employment.

Strangely—strangely on the surface, that is—most youths do the second thing.

The hotel boy, you see, is ageless. As long as he is reasonably able-bodied, he is a "boy" at sixty-five just as he was at sixteen when he began his career as a page, valet or bellhop. Throughout the years his earnings remain about the same; he is making no more at the end than he was at the beginning. Contrariwise, however, he is making "as much" at the beginning. And to exchange his handsome tip-earned income for one of the low-pay jobs through which he must climb to the top is very hard for a youth to do.

Still, quite a few do make the exchange. They are repelled by the specter of themselves as uniformed grandpas. Or some interested executive takes them in hand, ordering them to get with it or get out. Or they are afflicted with late growth, suddenly finding themselves too large for the role of flunky. In any event, and for one reason or another, many of the young men Mitch had worked with as a bellboy had risen to highly responsible positions.

Foresightedly, and simply out of liking, he had helped them along the privation path to the top. Now, with rare exceptions, they were ready to help him: out of liking and gratitude; out of practical considerations—who is ever beyond the need of a safe buck? (and with a smooth character like Mitch it was always safe); out of the hotel man's contempt for the genus chump. And any non-professional gambler who gambles is considered a chump.

Inevitably, he will be taken. So why shouldn't a friend do the taking?

Mitch flung open the door. On the threshold stood a plump, rosy-cheeked man in striped trousers and morning coat. Grinning almost to his thinly-haired scalp, he held out his arms.

"Mitch, you sweet bastard! I just discovered that you'd checked in!"

Mitch let out a groan of feigned dismay. "Turk! God save us all, it's Turk!" He dragged the plump one into the apartment, calling word of his arrival to Red. "All is lost, honey. Turkelson's here."

Turkelson chuckled delightedly as Red came running in. She hugged him enthusiastically, kissed him on top of the head and accepted a kiss on the cheek. "Is there no way," she asked, turning to Mitch, "to escape this character?"

"That," said Mitch, "is the question on everyone's lips."

"Well, he'd better behave himself," Red said severely. "He's thirty stories up."

Mitch urged him to sit down, before his weight pushed him through the carpet. Then he asked what Turkelson's position was at the place—did he wash dishes or clean out the johns? Turkelson chuckled that he had applied for both jobs, been rejected as untrustworthy and forced to accept the post of resident manager. Actually, he added with the faintest trace of gloom, the job was not as good as it looked. Practically everything was a concession—food, drink, laundry and valet, newsstand, florist shop and so on—leaving him only the management of the hotel proper.

"But I do all right." He brightened. "And I see you kids are certainly making out. When you can pop forty-five hundred for a month's rent—"

Red let out a yipe, and appeared to faint. Mitch shook his head disgustedly.

"Oh, God, Mitch!" Turkelson slapped his forehead. "I should have know you wouldn't tell her."

"Why should I have to with you in the same country?"

"But that's what I came up for, one of the things. To do something about it, I mean. Red, you dream creature, if you'll pass me the phone please...."

She passed it to him. Abruptly, he became a different man: imposing, humorless, voice cracking with authority as he spoke to the room clerk.

"... now you know better than this, Davis! You should know at least. Other things being equal, the rate in a case of this kind is governed by the availability of space and the desirability of the guests. We want people to come back, you know. Or did you have some other idea?... Well, all right, then. All right. But consult me, hereafter. Oh, yes, and make this, uh, thirty-seven-fifty."

He hung up the receiver, and beamed at them. Mitch pulled Red onto his lap, signaling her with a sharp little pat.
Red responded promptly.

"This is a nice man, Mitch. Maybe we should give him a little present."

"But he already has everything," Mitch said. "Dandruff, fallen arches, a sixty-four-inch bust—"

"Well, let's see," said Red, as Turkelson chortled helplessly. "Why don't we give him a bucket of bread-and-butter sandwiches? He's obviously on the point of starvation."

"One bucketful wouldn't put a dent in that yawning void. Do you suppose we could trust him with money?"

"It's now or never," Red said. "After all, he's a pretty big boy—horizontally."

"We'll give him this one chance," Mitch declared. "Turk, you are to spend five bills of that rebate on bread-and-butter sandwiches."

Turkelson flatly refused to accept the five hundred. After all, friends were friends.

He refused to accept so much, friends being friends. He absolutely would only accept it, because they were friends and friends should help each other. And since they were helping him, he must now help them.

"There's some big action at Zearsdale Country Club. I can get you a guest card."

"Can you put me in a game?"

"With that crowd? I couldn't put Jesus Christ in it!" Red and Mitch groaned in unison. They razzed him mercilessly, Turkelson chuckling and shaking and growing red with delight. He had been pretty embarrassed about the money (although God knew he could use it), and the razzing helped to dispel it.

"Catch this character"—Mitch jerked a thumb at him. "He'd actually get us a guest card to a country club!"

"It pays to have influence," Red said. "I bet he could even get our names in the telephone book."

"He's all heart," Mitch said. "P-o-t, heart." Laughing, the manager held up his hands. "All right, all right! But I do have something; I've just thought of something. Winfield Lord, Jr., is checking in here next week, and I know I can put you in with him. I can come right out and tell him that you're a gambler, and he'll be up here pounding on your door."

He beamed from Red to Mitch, very pleased with himself. Then, slowly, his smile faded and he looked almost comically plaintive.

"Please," he pleaded, "can't I do anything to suit you two?"

"You can stop using dirty words in my presence," Red said.

"Huh? But—"

"Like Winfield Lord, Jr.," Mitch explained.

"So all right, he's a real stinker," the manager conceded. "So hold your nose, and grab for that sweet-smelling Lord money. My God, the Lords own half the state of Texas, and—"

"How fast money goes in Texas," Mitch said. "Winfield Lord's part of it, anyway. Ten years, twenty million. All he has left now is a rubber checkbook, and the world's nastiest disposition."

"We take his checks," Turkelson said. "We've never had a minute's trouble with them either."

"That's different. His mother would make good on a legitimate expense."

"I happen to know that Frank Downing has taken his paper, too. More than fifty thousand dollars worth, and he got every nickel of it."

Mitch said that that also was different. No one was allowed to cool-out on Frank Downing. Winfield Lord's mother had had the choice of paying off, or keeping her son on the Lord ranch for the rest of his life.

"Downing, Frank Downing," Red mused. "Now, don't I know that name?"

"Of course, you do," Mitch told her. "He runs that store outside of Dallas. Kind of a Texas Monte Carlo except that Frank's place is probably bigger."

Turkelson coughed, running a finger between his tight wing collar and the folds of his neck. He said hopefully that perhaps the situation had changed with Winfield Lord, Jr. Maybe Mama Lord was loosening the strings of the bottomless Lord purse.

"I hardly think so," Mitch said. "News like that gets around."

"But you can't be sure!" Turkelson turned to Red. "It's worth a try, don't you think so, Red?"
"I think whatever Mitch thinks."
"Mitch is the boss, huh?" Turkelson twinkled.
"Of course he's the boss! What's so damned funny about that?"
Mitch kissed her, cuddled her protectively in his arms. "Red's my lamb," he smiled firmly. "Don't you tease my lamb, Turk."
"Certainly, she's a lamb. Haven't I always said so?" The manager gestured plaintively. "But, Mitch, I do wish you could see this Lord thing. After all, you're already here and he's going to be here. What can you lose but a little time?"
Mitch hesitated thoughtfully, examining the project in his mind; deciding that Turkelson was probably right. There was nothing to lose, and this was certainly no time to overlook a bet. But still... still, something seemed to hold him back. From some deep recess in his mind, a voice whispered darkly, pointing out that Lord was a bastard and that no good was to be had of him.
But—but maybe personal feelings were getting in the way of his reason. Lord had once tried to paw Red. He was too drunk to know what he was doing, of course—even to recognize who she was—but a thing like that...
Mitch sighed, pulled in two ways, almost irresistibly tugged by the need to be practical, yet still stubbornly resisting.
"Let me brood about it a little," he said, at last. "I'm kind of getting an idea for beating the bad-check angle, but I want to kick it around for a day or two. If it comes up yes, you're down for ten per cent."
"Oh, now," Turkelson protested feebly. "That's not necessary."
"Ten per cent—which you'll earn," Mitch said. "Meanwhile, we'll take that Zearsdale guest card. I can't get in the action, naturally, but at least I can show Red off."
Red kissed him, and stuck her tongue out at Turkelson. Chuckling, the manager stood up, promising to bring the guest card right away.
"You'd better not," Red declared. "You put that card in our room box!"
"But I'll be glad to—"
"Would you be glad to get killed?" Mitch demanded. "Red, you must tell this man about the birds and the bees."
Turbelson departed, chortling.
Mitch and Red returned to the bedroom.
They had a late and light lunch in mid-afternoon. Then, as Red summoned a beautician from the downstairs salon, Mitch went to see about renting a car. He had some trouble deciding between a sedan, a Lincoln Continental, and a black Jaguar convertible-coupé. Finally, feeling that the sedan might be a little showy, he settled on the Jag.
It was not a good choice. He was aware of that around eight o'clock that night, as he turned into the long curving driveway which led up to the club. Ahead of them, in a boxcar-length Rolls with both chauffeur and footman, rode an elderly man in full evening dress. He kept staring back through the rear window, then leaned forward to consult with the two livened servants, who also looked back briefly. Debouching finally at the entrance, the elderly one gave the Jaguar and its occupants the ultimate in quizzical stares, turning away with a look of such wry wonderment—an I'll-be-damned, what-have-we-here look—that Mitch almost winced.
So the car was all wrong. It was wrong by the mere fact of Red and Mitch being in it. There was prompt proof of that, if any further proof were needed.
A cutdown jalopy came roaring up the drive, throwing gravel over the Jaguar as it skidded to a stop. A half-dozen teenage boys and girls swarmed out of it, dressed in odds and ends of clothing; ran shouting and laughing into the clubhouse. The doorman, dressed like a coachman even to his whip, looked after them fondly. Then, turning back to Mitch, he critically examined the guest card.
"You were meeting someone, sir?" He poked the card back at Mitch. "Perhaps I could notify them for you."
"We're not meeting anyone."
"I see. Hmm. The term guest is used rather literally here, sir. These cards are only honored, ordinarily, that is, at the request of a member."
"I've used a great many guest cards," Mitch said coldly, "and I've never heard of such a practice."
"Obviously. So under the circumstances..." He signaled with his whip, and a uniformed attendant came running to remove the Jag. "We'll have the car readily available for you, sir."

Mitch could feel Red's hand tremble on his arm. Taking her up the three long steps of the club building, he smiled down at her reassuringly. But he felt none of the calm which he was trying to convey. His principal emotion was one of fury; a raging anger with himself for bringing her here.

Turkelson should have known what he was sending them into. Turk probably had known, as much as one could know by hearsay. But he would justifiably expect Mitch to be at least as well-informed. Information was half of Mitch's job. In the Pavlovian maze of the heavy hustle, he must always spot the proper tunnel, correctly associate action and reaction, sound with deed, word with word. Oil was a three-letter word if you were content to get your kicks from birdwatching. But if you liked the big time, you had better spell it Zearsdale. Jake Zearsdale. The unquestioned head of the fabulous "Houston Hundred."

Zearsdale was the founder of the club. Its membership was limited allegedly to the families and connections of the Hundred. Presumably, one of them owned the hotelapartment where Mitch and Red were staying—what more likely owner for such an establishment? So business being business, a few guest cards were made available. Which did not necessarily mean that they would be honored. That would be looked into after the guest arrived. Nor would anyone be a bit interested in whether he was affronted.

He was an outsider, wasn't he? He could neither hurt nor help the Clan. Well, then!

But that, that attitude, wasn't Texas, of course. It was only the wealthiest-people-in-the-world Texas. Mitch had always found Houston an exceptionally friendly city. He had simply been asking for it in coming to a place like this.

Immediately inside the doorway of the club building stood a squat, broad-shouldered man in a dark dinner jacket. He was frowning as he watched the door, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. His sharp, cold eyes stopped them like a wall, and for a moment it seemed that he would not unclasp his hands from behind his back and take the card which Mitch extended.

At last he did so, however, and he returned it with a wisp of a smile upon his thick, broad mouth. The cold eyes warmed as he looked from Mitch to Red, and he spoke with a voice which was faintly musical.

"The bar? Allow me to show you, please."

He guided them down the vaulted corridor to a vast room which whispered with music and the hum of acousticallystilled voices. Then, having led the way through the dimness, he saw them seated at the bar, snapped his fingers at an attendant and departed with a low bow.

Icy martinis were set in front of them. The barman hovered obsequiously, lighting their cigarettes, moving the ashtrays a fraction of an inch closer. Assured that they needed nothing else, he at last left, them alone. Mitch lifted his glass to Red, murmuring that the atmosphere had warmed considerably.

Red agreed that it had, but she still didn't like the place. "Let's leave as soon as we can, honey. We don't belong here, and this gang knows it."

"Oh? I'd say we'd made the grade with flying colors."

"And footprints on the seat of our pants. Please, Mitch..."

"I thought we'd have dinner. Maybe a dance or two."

"We can have it somewhere else." She studied his face, frowning. "You surely aren't going to try for anything here, are you?"

Mitch hesitated, taking a sip of his drink. As she prompted him anxiously, he started to reply, then abruptly broke off. A man was on the point of passing them. A tall man, whose dinner attire was perhaps an unmeasurable fraction too elegant, whose face was completely expressionless.

As he went by, his knuckles rapped Mitch's spine. Lips barely moving, he spoke two words.

"Get out."
In the rationalizing part of his mind, Mitch was inclined to blame his mother for his marriage to Teddy. He was subconsciously seeking a mother, he believed, when he allowed Teddy to trap him. In his leniency with Teddy, he was making amends to his mother for his actions at their last meeting. Their one and only meeting since the death of his father.

Admittedly, his thoughts on the subject were very confused. It was impossible to think of Teddy without being confused. Almost as hard as it was to think of Teddy as a mother-type. What Mitch thought about the first time he saw her was certainly not motherhood, but rather that joyous biological preliminary to woman's noblest estate.

He was night belihopping at the time. Teddy, so he had learned, was the highly-paid night auditor for an oil company. Finishing her duties, she would eat in the hotel's coffee shop just as dawn was breaking, then have a cab called to take her home. It fell to Mitch, his second night on the job, to call the cab.

She was a very wholesome-looking young woman, with corn-colored hair and a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. Severely dressed, she still had a lot of stuff to show. And Mitch found himself looking at it as they waited together at the taxi entrance. He also found, after a moment, that she was studying him out of long-lashed green eyes. Embarrassed, he was about to shift his gaze when the eyes squinched shut in a double wink—an enticing nose-crinkling wink—and she growled at him. Yes, "growled!"

"Grrr," she said. "Rrrruff!"
"W-Wh-at?" he said.
"Grrr, wooof!" she said. "Bow-wow!"

Well, Mitch didn't have to be hit in the face with a pie to know when dessert was being passed. In a little more time than it took to get her telephone number, he was at her apartment, figurative fork in hand. He warmly declared himself ready to share the bed which she was obviously preparing to retire to. Teddy demurely demurred.

"I'm saving my candy for my daddy," she explained. "I figure that if a man buys the box he ought to get all the pieces.

Mitch suggested that they lie down and talk it over. Teddy primly shook her corn-colored head.

"Now, you wouldn't want to rob my future husband, would you? You wouldn't want to take something that was rightfully his?"
"Well, look,"—Mitch frowned. "If that's the way you feel, why did you, uh—"
"I thought you might like to examine the merchandise," Teddy said. "I mean, how could you make a commitment unless you knew what you were getting?"
"Uh, w-what—huh!" Mitch gasped.
"But please handle with care," Teddy murmured, as she shyly shed her negligee. "None of these items can be replaced."

Crazy? Sure, it was! 'Who said different? Mitch was pretty crazy himself by the time she shoved him out the door, politely wishing him a good day's sleep. A good day's sleep, for God's sake, after all that seeing and not a single sampling!

He had never felt so frustrated. So furious. So—yes—flattered. Here was obviously a very high-class girl, a woman rather, who not only had everything it took downstairs, but a brain to go with it. A woman like that could have any man she wanted; she probably had to fight them off with a club. Yet she had chosen him, Boy Nobody, and she was prepared to go to any lengths (well, practically any) to get him.

And how could you knock a thing like that?

He was back in her apartment the next morning, and the next, and the next. Weakening, he tried to get at the reason behind her behavior, the why of her desire for marriage with him. But the answer, no answer, was always the same. "Because you're my sugar, my own sweet daddy."

"But you don't even know me! You never saw me until a few days ago."
"Oh, yes I do," she smiled serenely. "Oh, yes, I did."
"But how could you? I mean, when?"
"I know my daddy," she said. "I'd know my sugar anywhere."

At the end of the week, he married her. There were one hundred and ten delicious pounds of reasons for doing so, and no apparent reason not to.

On their wedding night they both got sozzled on champagne. So sozzled that he was a little hazy about his share in consummating the marriage. But awakening to the sound of Teddy's sobs, he charged himself with brutality. She shook her head, hugging him fiercely.

"I'm j-just so happy, darling. S-So glad you're not d-dead!"

"Hmm, what?" Mitch mumbled foggily. "Who's dead?"

"I know you couldn't be, darling! Everyone said you were, even the general wrote me a letter. But I knew, I knew, I knew..."

"'S'nice," Mitch yawned, and was suddenly asleep again.

He was not sure, the next morning, that it hadn't been a dream. In fact, he hardly thought about it at all, Teddy being a woman to give a man much more interesting and delightful things to think about. When eventually he became alarmed and consulted a psychiatrist—a permanent resident at the hotel where he was working—and was advised that Teddy quite probably had cast him in the leading role in her own private sex fantasy, something with roots trailing back into puberty, he was incredulous and angry.

It just couldn't be, dammit! It couldn't! Yet doubtless it was; he never had a better explanation for her. And the dream which he had become a part of—which Teddy had hooked him into being a part of—ultimately turned into a nightmare.

Meanwhile, there was the meeting with his mother. A meeting which, in a negative way, had at least one plus quality. It almost made Teddy seem like a dull-normal person.

It was about five years after his father's death had separated them, before he saw his mother. She wrote occasionally and vaguely, and he replied. But his letters were often returned for want of a forwarding address. Once he got an urgent wire from Dallas, asking for a hundred dollars. One year she remembered his birthday three times, each with a ten-dollar bill. Finally, after a silence of almost a year, she wrote him that she was married and very happy.

The letter had been a long time in catching up with him. It was addressed from the same city in which he was then working. He read it, feeling a nostalgic tug at his heart. Having an afternoon off from his job, he went out to see her.

The house was in a scrofulous neighborhood of similar dwellings. Flanking it on one side was a weed-grown railroad siding. On the other was an abandoned commercial building, its crumbling façade clustered with grinning, frowning, earnest-looking posters of innumerable political aspirants—cardboard vultures on the bones of a dead dream.

Stepping up on the porch and starting to knock, Mitch glanced through the opened screen door. It was a so-called shotgun house, its three-and-a-half rooms in a row. It was just about impossible not to see into the bedroom, the second room back, and to hear the epigamic surgings of the bedsprings.

Mitch lowered his hand without knocking. He went quietly down the walk, and sauntered up to the corner and back. Then, he moved toward the porch again, whistling noisily. He knocked. He knocked a second time, and the throaty flushing of a toilet answered him. In the fragmentated silence that followed, a silence punctuated by a man's surly monosyllables and simpering whinny which could not be, but was, his mother's, Mitch called out to her.

"Mother? It's me, Mitch."

In the interim before she finally came to the door, Mitch almost called it off and left. He did not see how he could face the whinny, the owner of that cowering voice, and he was sure that he had better not face her husband. He could see the man moving about the bedroom, a swarthy, sleekhaired character with very broad shoulders and an invisible waist. And he detested every inch of what he saw.

Still, knowing that he should beat it, Mitch was somehow held where he was. So after almost ten minutes, he was at last greeting his mother through the rusted screen. Through it, since she did not unlatch it, although her hand hesitated fearfully in the neighborhood of the latch.

"Francis,"—she spoke weakly over her shoulder. "It's my son, dear."

"Big deal."
"Uh, would it be all right—could I have him come in, dear?"

"He ain't my kid."

"Oh, thank you, dear, thank you," his wife breathed gratefully. And Mitch was allowed to enter.

She gave Mitch a hasty peck, obviously fearfully aware of the man in the other room. Mitch sat down on one of the three straight chairs, a little puzzled by the appearance of the divan until he recognized it as the front seat of an automobile. His mother asked him what he was doing now, and he said he was night bell-capain at the city's leading hotel. She said that was nice, oh, that was awfully nice; wasn't that nice, Francis? (""Big deal"."") And Mitch thought, Holy God, what's happened to her?

He knew the answer to that one, of course, and in a way it seemed to have been good for her. The peppery waspishness had given way to a cowlike contentment. She was washedout looking, haggard as a witch. But, hell, she was pushing fifty now, and Francis the Gallant couldn't be over thirtyfive.

"... a dancer, you know," his mother was saying. "Francis is a very talented dancer. Everyone says so."

"That's nice. Oh, that's awfully nice," Mitch said.

"Yes, uh, yes, he dances."

"Oh," said Mitch. "You mean he "dances"."

"Y-Yes... A dancer."

"Well, that's nice. That's awfully nice," Mitch said. And then, his mother's eyes begging, he made himself behave. "I'm sure he's very good," he said. "I'd like to see him sometime."

Francis did not come into the living room until he was fully dressed in a very "sharp" black suit with broad chalk stripes, toothpick-toed shoes, a black shirt and a yellow tie. He waited until Mitch had arisen and extended his hand. Then he sat down, ignoring the hand, taking a swig from the can of beer he was carrying.

He stared at Mitch silently, eyes unblinking. Mitch stared back at him smiling.

"So you're a bellboy," he finally grunted. "What do you do when a guy asks you to get him a woman?"

"What do "you" do?" Mitch said.

"I heard that all you birds was pimps."

"Did you indeed?" Mitch smiled. "And what's your personal opinion?"

His mother was fidgeting nervously; she whimpered the statement-question that Mitch might like a can of beer. "So let him have one," Francis said, and he suddenly pitched the can at Mitch.

Mitch caught it, but awkwardly; beer splashed onto the trousers of his one-hundred-and-fifty-dollar suit. Very carefully, he set the can down on the bare pine floor. He again turned his smile on Francis, who was shaking with laughter.

"You ain't much of a catcher, bellboy!"

"No, I'm not," Mitch smiled. "But you should see me pitch."

"What'd you pay for that suit you're wearin'?"

"I made it myself," Mitch said. "I make all my own clothes."

"Don't get smart, bellboy!"

"You should try it," Mitch said. "After all, what have you got to lose?"

He could feel his smile widening, freezing on his face. His mother knew its meaning, and twittered an attempted diversion. But her husband silenced her with a look.

"How much loot you make a week, bellboy?"

"I'll trade information with you," said Mitch. "Where do you keep your little red hat?"

"Huh? I ain't got no little red hat."

"But what do you use to collect the pennies in?"

"Collect pen—huh?"

"That people give you for dancing," Mitch explained. "Or doesn't the organ-grinder trust you with money?"

His mother whinnied fearfully.
Francis cursed, swarming up out of his chair. But he just wasn't fast enough. Before he knew what was happening to him (if he ever knew), Mitch had given him a kick in the groin, an elbow across the windpipe and a knee in the face. Then, as Mitch's mother screamed and clawed at him, he methodically stomped in her husband's ribs.

He was sorry, terribly, terribly sorry, even as he fled the house. The fact that Francis was the king of the boobs was no reason to half-kill him. In attacking Francis, he realized, the real victim had been his mother. He would never dare see her again now. And he would have to get himself out of town very quickly.

He went home and gave Teddy the news, promising to send for her as soon as he found another job. Teddy declared that she was going right along with him. Her daddy wasn't going to go any place without his mama.

"We'll go to Forth Worth," she announced. "I know of a very good job I can get there. The same kind of work I'm doing now."

"But what about me? I don't know that I can get a job there."

"You don't need a job; I make more than enough for both of us. Anyway, you'll be busy taking care of the baby."

"'Baby!' What the hell are you talking about?" Teddy raised her skirt, and pulled down her panties, baring the creamy environs of her belly button. She pulled his head against the area, and suddenly he felt something—a small but unmistakable kick.

"See?" she beamed at him as he jerked away. "Eight months, and it hardly shows at all. Some women are like that, the doctor says. He says I'll probably be able to work almost up to the time of its birth."

"B-But—But—" Mitch waved his hands desperately. "So everything's going to be just fine and dandy. Mama will work and daddy will take care of the baby—a baby "should" be taken care of by its daddy—and he'll have plenty of time to play with his little dicey-wicey."

Mitch suddenly exploded. He asked her what the hell she took him for? He, by God, would provide the money for the family—he'd find some kind of a job—and she, by God, would take care of the baby!

"I will not," said Teddy, iron coming into her dulcet voice. "I already have a baby to take care of. My daddy's my baby."

"You heard me!" Mitch said. "And knock off that daddymama alfalfa! Shake it out of your pretty little skull! It's beginning to give me the meeyams!"

"Don't you sass your mama!" Teddy said.

"Goddammit!" Mitch yelled. "I said to knock it off!"

He flung himself down on the bed. Face clouded ominously, Teddy marched into the bathroom.

He heard water running. He bit his lip, remorse flooding over him. My God—first his mother, then his wife! Pushing around two women in one day, the only two who meant anything to him. And Teddy was pregnant! Almost on the point of becoming a mother! It was up to him to humor her at such a time, not shout and curse at her.

He was on the point of calling an apology to her, when Teddy suddenly loomed over him. She shoved a washrag into his mouth. She scrubbed vigorously.

For a moment he was too startled to move. Then, gasping and gagging and retching, he struggled free of her. Staggered about the room, literally frothing at the mouth.

He spat, cursing sickishly, and a flood of soap bubbles sprayed from his lips. Teddy watched him with an air of selfrighteous sympathy.

"Now, mama didn't want to do that," she said. "It hurt mama much more than it hurt daddy."

"For God's sake," Mitch sputtered weakly. "Why the hell—what kind of a damned fool—"

"You better be careful," Teddy said. "You better be a nice daddy, or mama will wash your mouth out again."
There was a soft upward swelling of the music in the bar. Mitch arose from his stool with a little nod to Red.
"Sit tight, honey. I'll be right back."

"Mitch"—her eyes were following the tall, overly-elegant man who had told them to leave. "Who is he, Mitch?"

"Frank Downing."

He left quickly before Red could protest. At a door some distance away, Downing turned and glanced over his shoulder, then passed on through it.

The room was a kind of annex to the bar. A place to lounge and confer informally. The lights here were even dimmer than they had been outside, and there was not even the muted rustle of a voice to whisper of another presence. Mitch blinked, peering around, trying to penetrate the shrouding shadows. Then, there was a "click"—the flame of a cigarette lighter, and Frank Downing's phlegmatic poker face hung limned against the darkness.

He was sitting over at the far side of the room at a small writing desk. Guided by the spasmodic glow of Downing's cigarette, Mitch made his way across the deep pile carpet, and sat down opposite the Dallas gambler.

He said nothing, waiting. Downing said nothing. Minutes passed. Mitch lighted a cigarette, and went on waiting. At last Downing broke the silence: A reluctant grunt of admiration. Then he sighed softly, tapping out his cigarette.

"That redhead," he said, "is positively the most woman I have ever seen."

"Yes," Mitch said innocently. "My sister is a very attractive girl."

Downing let out a snort. "Nobody," he said, "but "nobody" ever had a sister like that."

"So?"

"So buy her another drink, if you like. Buy her some dinner. Dance with her a few times. And then get the hell out of here like I told you to. Or maybe you didn't hear me?"

"I heard you."

"I don't think you did," Downing said. "No one ever hangs around a place after I tell them to beat it."

"Maybe I'm an exception."

"That redhead is certainly a lot of woman," Downing said absently. "A woman like that deserves to be happy."

He started to get up. Mitch hastily put out a restraining hand.

He had to operate in Texas. Except perhaps for Tulsa and Oklahoma City, Texas was the only remaining pasture for the big time gambler's grazing. Here alone was there always another metropolis to move on to, lush with the long-green and stubbornly resistant to the blight of credit cards and charge-a-plates. Here they liked the feel of money. Here they were shocked by the piker notion of "never carrying more than fifty dollars." Here were people who'd gambled their very existence for what they'd got, and who stood ready to gamble again. Here and almost here alone did restlessness, impatience and self-confidence—the conviction that there was always more to be had where the first had come from—combine to make dice an accepted social pastime, much as bridge and rummy were accepted in areas where the money was older and its owners more effete.

So there it was. He had to operate in Texas. He could not operate there— in fact he was very apt not to operate "period"—if he antagonized Downing.

"All right," he said, at last. "All right, Frank. But I don't like it."

"I knew you'd see it my way," Downing murmured.

"I'm no punk. We've always got along together. Now you holler frog, and I've got to jump. Why? What's the answer? Why do you want me out of here?"

"Give the girl another drink," Downing said. "Give her some dinner. Dance her around a few times."

"Come off of it!" Mitch frowned determinedly. "I've got a right to know." He hesitated, studying the gambler. "If you're afraid I might try to crumb-in on your action—"

"Don't be stupid. I wouldn't pop for a penny outside my own store."

"Then, why? Red and I are good people. Why treat us like dirt?"

Downing didn't seem to hear him. Slowly, he lighted another cigarette, absentmindedly contemplating the exhaled
stream of smoke as Mitch silently waited. He ground the cigarette out again, hesitated, and spoke. There was a peculiar note in his normally toneless voice.

"Ever in the Dallas river bottoms in the old days, Mitch?"

"No." Mitch shook his head puzzled.

Downing said that he'd been born there, and it was quite a place. Crap Creek, the bottoms, squatters had called it; shit creek. Because that was just about what the river was. So thick you could walk on it in some places. Yet people bathed in it—what else? They drank from it. They drowned their bastard infants in it, and there were many of them to drown. For whoring was one of the largest industries, and unwanted babies a principal crop. Bastards and rats and disease. But Frank Downing had been lucky, a happy victim of a process which snatched him from the bottoms to the relative heaven of the state's toughest reform school. He had eaten regularly there. He had had a bed to sleep in, and clothes to wear. He had gotten Texas' standard eleven years of schooling. He had received invaluable training in the arts of bribery, graft, strong-arm and gambling. And when he left, the head guard himself had given him the warmest of recommendations to the chief of the Dallas vice-squad....

"That's what I came from, Mitch. From there to here. From there to Zearsdale Country Club."

"Yes," Mitch nodded, still puzzled. "That's quite a story, Frank, and I appreciate your telling it to me. But—"

"'Membership!'" Mitch wanted to know how he could do that. The gambler spelled it out for him.

"We're both pros. You kratz yourself up, and it could rub off on me. Like, say, we were working a frammis together."

Mitch argued with him, declaring that Downing was really reaching for it. Downing said that he'd been really reaching for a long time, all the way from the Dallas river bottoms. It was true that Mitch wasn't known as a pro. But he could get known. It was also true that Mitch wasn't the kind to kratz up. But that could change, too.

"The point is, Mitch, there's always a chance when you take chances, and on you I don't have to take any. So I wish you hadn't rushed off so fast. I was going to tell you goodbye, but I see you've already gone."

He nodded, grinned satirically and started to rise. Again, Mitch detained him.

"'I'm holding light, Frank. I need to hit.'"

"Yeah?" Downing obviously didn't believe him. "If you hadn't already left, you could see my collar was on frontwards."

"I mean it, Frank. I've just about got to hit."

"Oops!" Downing pointed. "There he goes!"

"What?"

"The chaplain. He just ran out the front door," Downing said. "Probably couldn't stand to see a man crying. For that matter, neither can I."

Mitch knew he had blundered. He reversed himself immediately. "All right," he laughed. "I'm here, and I want to get my feet wet. Now, suppose I never touch the dice myself. Just fade, and try to make out with the odds. That couldn't possibly do any harm, could it?"

Downing hesitated. Aside from liking Mitch, he believed in doing favors where no cost to himself was involved.

"You're asking me to put you in the game," he said.

"No, I'm not. Of course, I figured that you'd probably want to watch me..."

Downing said that it worked out to the same thing. Mitch denied it. "Well all go in together, sure; you and Red and I. You can make talk with her while I'm at the table. But that doesn't add up to putting me in the game. You know everyone, and we're just a couple of more people that you know."

"Well..." The gambler half-nodded. "You don't push yourself, now. You can't do it here."

"I wouldn't do it anywhere."
"And you only fade. No shooting."

Mitch agreed. They arose, Mitch grinning to himself. Tonight he would simply break the ice, get himself known to the high-rollers. Then, another night, after making sure that Downing was no longer in town, he would come back for another visit..

They reached the door of the room. Downing suddenly turned on him, with a curse. "Why, you sneaky—! It went right past me, and I didn't see it!"

"Yes?" Mitch said innocently. "Something wrong, Frank?"

"You didn't have any intention of playing! You didn't even know where the action was!"

"We made a deal, Frank."

"I know. But watch yourself, Mitch. Make that the last fast one of the evening."

Red saw the by-play from the bar. She coupled it and colored it with their earlier encounter with the gambler, and the result was not flattering to Downing.

She bared her teeth, rather than smiled, as Mitch introduced them. He started to help her down from the bar stool, and her elbow pulled firmly from his grasp. His brows raised slightly. Ironic humor twinkled at the back of his eyes. He had been around for a very long time, and was a very long way from his place of origin. The situation appealed to him, and he knew how to make the most of it.

The action was on the third floor. Downing guided them to a private elevator, and its operator gave them one unobtrusively searching glance, photographing them in his mind. Debouching from the car, they were met by another man, a suave but huskier version of the elevator operator. And again there was that swift photographing glance.

He opened a door on the opposite side of the hall, stood back, with a little bow, and pulled it shut after them.

The room was approximately octagonal in shape; sunken, a few feet from the entrance, by three broad steps. There were no windows. A bar-buffet, with a Negro attendant, halfcircled a corner of the room. Flanked by four long, low lounges, set back at a comfortable distance, was an oblong dice table.

A half-dozen people stood around it, one of them a stout middle-aged woman. With a nod to his companions, Mitch wandered over to it. Downing and Red sat down on a lounge.

Laughing inwardly, the gambler gave her a confidential wink. "How about a good stiff drink, honey? You look like a gal that could slug it down."

Red shook her head. "No, thank you!"

"It don't cost nothin'," Downing said craftily. "Get yourself pie-eyed, and it won't cost you a penny."

"No!"

She tried to ignore the gambler, keeping her eyes on Mitch, watching the easy way he made himself one with the group around the table. But Downing would not be ignored. He kept up the dumb act, even nudging her with his elbow, until be again had her exasperated attention.

"... and you know somethin'?" he was saying. "I think you're a heck of a pretty gal."

"Gee, Dad!"—she gave him an icy grin. "You're a daisy!"

"It's sure been a hot day, ain't it?" Downing went on. "Sweated so bad I had to wash my feet."

"Why you poor thing, you!" Red said. "Didn't it make you awfully sick?"

"Well, yeah it did kind of. You know what I always say? I always say it ain't the heat but the humidity."

"Do you?" Red said. "Do you always say it ain't the heat but the humidity?"

"Yep. Yessir, that's what I always say."

"Well, you'd better write it down somewhere," Red said. "You might forget it, and then where would you be?"

Downing pulled a look of heavy suspicion. He asked her if she was trying to razz him or somethin'. "I'll bet you are," he said. "I'll bet you're tryin' to razz me or somethin'."

"An intelligent gentleman like you? Perish the thought!"

"You can't fool me," Downing said darkly. "I reckon you don't like me very much, do you?"

Red turned on him, giving him the full effect of her scornful eyes. "No, I don't like you, Mr. Frank Downing,"
she said. "To be honestly frank, I don't like you a darned bit!"

"Well, there's nothing like being honestly frank," Downing murmured. "Unless it's redundant."

Red started. She blushed, tried to look indignant and suddenly giggled. "Why, you— you—!"

"Something wrong, lady?" Downing said innocently. "There certainly is!" Red declared. "Just where have you been hiding?"

"Me? I been here all the time, ma'am. Sittin' right next to the humidity."

"Then that's quite long enough," Red said firmly. "You get right up from there and bring me a drink!"

Downing laughed and got up. He brought drinks for both of them, along with a plate of hors d'oeuvres. A brisk conversation sprang up between them, and a feeling of liking as well. One of those peculiarly strong likenings, which so often evolve from meetings that have started off badly.

Meanwhile, the man nearest Mitch had picked up the dice. He was apparently the big winner of the evening, the pockets of his dinner jacket bulging with currency. An oldish young man, with prematurely gray hair, he dug out a fistful of bills and dropped them on the table.

"Let's see. Four, five, six..." He sorted it with one finger. "Seven, seven-five. Shoot it all."

Money showered down on the green felt. Rattling the dice, he announced that he was shooting seventy-five hundred, with a thousand still open.

"Only a thousand, people. Don't make me fall back before I fire." His eyes swept the group, hesitated at Mitch, then tendered an invitation. "A thousand open. All or any part."

"It's only money," Mitch smiled, and he took out his wallet.

The dice rolled. Came out with a hard eight. The man followed with a four, a six, another four—"another hard four"—and bounced back with his hard eight. "Another hard eight."

He let it ride. Fifteen thousand dollars. There was two thousand open that time, and Mitch took it.

The dice rolled and stopped with two deuces up. Another hard four! Three of them in less than as many minutes! To Mitch it was like a red flag.

It could be on the level, of course. It couldn't be anything else in a place like this. But still...

He watched the progression of numbers, the dice combinations as they rolled out. Six—"four-two". Six again—"and again four-two". And here came another hard eight! Then, two deuces—a hard four! That made four of them now, four hard fours! And it made the man winner.

Mitch stood stunned, certain of the truth but unable to associate it with the circumstance. The man wasn't a hustler. These people knew him; he was obviously a friend of long standing. At any rate, no hustler would be so crude. He wouldn't have to. It was too dangerous. The dice handler depended on skill, not some device which he might be caught with.

Laughing, the prematurely gray man gestured, indicating that he would shoot the whole thirty grand. Then he saw Mitch's expression, and his smile drew in, and he acted. Swiftly he swept the money up with his dice hand, jamming it into his already-bulging coat pocket. With the same movement, his hand came out of the pocket and spun two dice out on the table.

"Pass the dice," he smiled pleasantly at Mitch. "I hope you'll have my luck, sir."

"It isn't luck," Mitch said. "You're using crooked dice."

"What?" A perplexed smile-frown. "That's not a very good joke, my friend."

Mitch nodded, agreeing that it wasn't. He asked to see the dice the man had been using. "The ones in your pocket, I mean. You switched them when you were handling your money."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Downing rise, march Red firmly toward the door while she looked anxiously back over her shoulder. That was the right thing to do, of course, but it added nothing to his assurance. There was a hint in it that he, Mitch Corley, had pulled a giant economy-sized goof.

"I mean it," he said doggedly. "You won that money with crooked dice."

"Did I? Does anyone else feel the same way?"

No one did, and they made it clear. They seemed to move a little closer to the gray-haired man, staring coldly at Mitch; a kindred group, facing a common enemy.
"You're free to search me, if you do." The man looked around at them, beaming. "I'm always willing to oblige a friend."

"Don't be silly, Johnny,"—an embarrassed murmur. "What the hell, Johnny? We're all pals here."

The gray head turned to Mitch, focused amused eyes on him. "It looks like you made a mistake, my friend. Possibly you've had a little too much to drink."

"There's no mistake. Now, I'll take a look at those dice!"

"Help yourself. The dice are on the table."

"I mean the ones in your pocket. I'll take a look at them, or I'll take three thousand dollars!"

"No," the man smiled firmly. "That isn't what you'll do, at all."

Mitch took a step toward the man. The man fell back into a fighting crouch. At the same instant, a steely grip closed over Mitch's arm and whirled him around.

It was the stocky, broad-shouldered man who had met him and Red at the entrance to the clubhouse. The maître d', perhaps, or a captain of waiters.

"Yes?" he said, in his faintly musical voice. "What seems to be the trouble?"

Mitch told him curtly. The stocky man shook his head. "That's impossible. Just who are you to make such a charge?"

"You know who I am," Mitch snapped. "You saw, my guest card tonight."

"May I see it again, please?"

Mitch handed it to him. The man scanned it, ripped it in two, and dropped the pieces on the floor.

"You're not welcome here, Mr. Corley. I advise you to leave immediately."

"Now, wait a minute!" Mitch raged. "What kind of a place is this, anyway? I get cheated out of three thousand dollars, and you—Just who the hell are you to push me around?"

"No one has pushed you around, Mr. Corley. Any disturbance has been caused by you."

"We'll see what the manager has to say! Now, I want your name!"

"Of course," the man nodded. "The name is Jake Zearsdale."
Red had fallen asleep, at last.

Mitch moved quietly from her side, tucked the covers back around her and went into the front room. He fixed himself a drink. Taking it over to a window, he stood looking out over the city. Troubledly, staring unseeing at the sleeping metropolis, he sorted through the night's happenings.

There had been nothing to do but leave the club quietly, of course. Cheated of three thousand dollars, a serious loss at this particular time, he could only leave, hoping that this would be the end of the matter. Which, according to Frank Downing, it might not be. The gray-haired man, Downing told him, was a long-time friend and business associate of Zearsdale. And Zearsdale was a man who cherished a friend and cracked down hard on an enemy.

Red and Downing were waiting at the club entrance when he came out that night. The gambler was cynically amused by what had happened.

"Maybe we could go into partnership, Mitch. There ought to be big money in renting you Out as a chump."

"Now, you just stop that, Frank," Red scolded. "Mitch did exactly the right thing!"

"Did he? Then how come he's got that egg all over his face? So much that it even rubbed off on me."

"I'm sorry," Mitch said. "I hope I haven't spoiled anything for you, Frank."

Downing said that only time would tell about that. If the club had members who used six-four-eight dice, he wasn't sure that he wanted membership anyway.

Mitch declared that the man had been using them, all right. Downing shrugged, nodded.

"If you say so. He probably saw that big chump sign you're wearing."

Red punched the gambler on the arm. Mitch said, "All right, Frank, just what should I have done? What would you have done?"

"I'd have watched the dice awhile before I did any fading, if I'd been sap enough to buck a game like that in the first place."

"You mean I should have been looking for a cheat among those people?"

"Well, maybe not," Downing admitted. "But you should have kept your mouth shut after you got clipped. What did you expect this Johnny Birdwell to do?—confess that he was a mechanic? Did you think his friends were going to toss him over and side with you?"

Mitch couldn't argue the point. Obviously, in view of the way things had turned out, he had been wrong to holler. Along with the loss of his three grand, he had also lost the potentially lucrative opportunity to return to the club and had possibly gotten himself a powerful enemy.

"So okay, I'm a chump," he sighed. "What do I do about it?"

"Shoot yourself. What else?" Downing laughed and held out his hand. "Take it easy, you two. And come and see me whenever you're in Dallas."

He meant it. The gambler did not pretend friendliness when he felt unfriendly. So that at least, Mitch thought, was a break. To have had Downing sore at him on top of everything else—the shortage of money, the lack of immediate prospects—

Well, there was one prospect. Winfield Lord, Jr. And there was a way, seemingly, to collect on Lord's nominally worthless checks.

Mitch returned to bed, slightly cheered. But very slightly. A vague feeling of unease gnawed at him, a premonition that tonight's misadventure portended still further trouble. Zearsdale?—Well, just what could Zearsdale do, anyway? The oilman would find Mitch Corley's nose very, very clean. Much cleaner, doubtless, than that of the workaday citizen. The Mitch Corleys of the world could not afford the petty nastiness, the shady little deeds, which were generally shrugged off as the everybody-does-it-norm. They, the world's Corleys, shuddered at the notion of stealing towels from a hotel or betraying a confidence or making time with a friend's wife.

"There was always a risk in such shenanigans, and the professional gambler had enough risks as it was. Zearsdale, then, if he was inclined to make trouble, would have a hard time finding a vulnerable spot.

Of course, Mitch was vulnerable by the fact of being what he was. Of living as he and Red lived. So...
She rolled over in the bed, and put her arms around him. "Don't worry any more, darling," she whispered. "Everything will be all right."

"Of course it will." He patted the satiny plumpness of her bottom. "I'm sorry if I waked you up, honey."

"That's okay. Want me to give you something to make you Sleep?"

He did and she did, and it did. But the sleep seemed almost as brief as the treatment which brought it about. One minute he was dozing off, the next—or so it seemed—Red was shaking him, telling him that he would have to hurry because breakfast was already on the way up.

He arose promptly, and headed for the bathroom. Grumpily wondering why he had been called so early, but recognizing that Red would have had her reasons. Husband-like, he had learned long ago that if Red thought he should know something or remember something, it was best to pretend that he did; otherwise, he would find himself guilty of possibly the worst crime on the wifely calendar—ignorance of something of great importance to her, which should therefore be of equal importance to him.

He had shaved and was in the shower when Red poked her head in the door. Was he about ready? Breakfast had just arrived. He called that he'd be there in a shake, hoping she would jog his memory with a clue. When she didn't—hearing her reclose the bathroom door—he called to her again.

"Uh, about how much time have we got, honey?"

"Well... were we going to try to get there by noon?"

"Get there? Get where?"

"Whatever you think." He turned off the shower and began toweling himself. "Uh, where shall we eat lunch?"

"Well—Oh, I know! We'll take it with us. I'll have the dining room pack us a big hamper."

"Fine, oh, fine," Mitch said, desperately searching his memory.

"Maybe I should call ahead, too, huh? So we'll be expected."

"Uh, yes, you do that," Mitch said.

The door closed. He got out of the shower, and reached for his robe. And suddenly he remembered. Why, of course! They were driving up to his son's school today. This was the day they were seeing Sam, his son—and he had forgotten! Hurrying out of the bathroom to breakfast, Mitch felt a wrench of conscience. How bad off could a guy be, anyway, to forget a visit to his own son?

They had breakfast, and dressed. Mitch in tweeds and a dark sport shirt, Red in a fawn-colored travel suit with a head scarf of off-ivory silk. As they took the elevator downstairs, Mitch asked her to remind him that the quarterly payment on his income tax was about due. Red said she would do it, and that he was not to talk about anything unpleasant for the rest of the day.

Turkelson himself was at their car, supervising the tucking in of a Thermos-type hamper. Mitch addressed him as boy, and handed him a dime tip. The manager accepted it with as much bowing as his portliness would permit, then exploded into laughter as they drove away.

It took them perhaps an hour to get out of Houston and the city's heavy traffic. Then, having reached the highway, he settled the Jag down to a more-or-less steady seventy miles an hour. It was a warm day, but a little cool in the swiftly moving car. Red moved close to Mitch, her small shoulder pressing against his. Glancing up into the car's mirror, he surprised her in a look of such love and devotion that a quick lump came into his throat.

"Mitch," she said softly. "You're the dearest, darlingest, nicest man that ever lived."

"What took you so long to catch on?" Mitch grinned.

"I've known it right from the beginning. Sometimes I forget, I guess, and then something happens like this morning—You'd forgotten about coming to see Sam, hadn't you?"

Mitch nodded guiltily. "I should have had my ass kicked."

"You were a darling," Red insisted. "You pretended to remember because I expected you to. To keep me from being hurt or disappointed in you."

Mitch said that that was the way he was—perfect. The thought, not highly original, flicked through his mind that the more different women were, the more they were the same. How many times, for example, had Teddy and his mother and Red done just about the exact opposite of what he had expected them to do? Teddy would smile at him when he expected a slap. His mother would slap him when logic prophesied a smile. Red—well, Red had just
rewarded forgetfulness with tenderness. As proof of her love for him. All this was not to say, of course, that a woman would always do the thing contrary to a man's expectations. No, a woman was not going to be as easily understood as "that!" The subtle kinship which united her with her sex had a sweetly mythic as well as a contradictory quality. About her was the kind of wide-eyed, innocent, infuriating, deliciously irrelevant relevance that associated Easter bunnies with painted hen's eggs.

He was brought out of these abstract reveries when, a few miles short of his son's school, they stopped at a service station. The emblem Z (for Zearsdale) on the station's gas pumps was responsible. He had seen these signs before, naturally, but they had had no meaning for him. Now, after last night, they had a great deal. For a man needs something very, very special in the oil business to become an important refiner and distributor.

Attempting to become one, he invariably is confronted by the giant-with-many-names who proceeds nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a million to stomp the holy God out of him. The giant has posted Keep Out signs around the field of refining and distributing. Littering that field are the bleached and broken bones of intruders who had everything to go the distance—yet not quite enough.

There was Gidsen, for example, a man with great wit and charm, and the backing of some of the east's wealthiest families. No more. There was Harlund, who had as much going for him as Gidsen, plus plenty of political power. No more. And so on, endlessly.

To fight the many-named giant, you had to fight his way. And that was not something you could learn. It had to be second-nature with you. An instinct for the jugular. A conviction that the destruction of an enemy was as necessary as defecation. A social outlook that was as intestinal as it was amoral; seeing one's neighbors as something to be gobbled up, and a knife in the back as the best way to a man's heart.

Not all the giant's successful rivals were like that, of course. There are always exceptions. But Mitch doubted that Zearsdale was one of them.

"What the hell? he asked himself. I'm not that important. I didn't really do anything to get him down on me".

His son, Sam, was waiting for them at the gate of the school. Mitch's heart quickened as the boy came toward them—black-haired, gray-eyed, wirily trim in his cadet's uniform. The long-ago image of one Mitchell Corley, dice handler de luxe.

Sam shook hands with him, kissed Red and complimented her on her suit. Then, he cast a lingering and longing eye at the car's controls, and cocked a brow at his father.

"Okay," Mitch laughed. "If it's all right with your Aunt Red."

"Of course, it's all right," Red smiled. "I'll sit on your lap, Mitch."

Mitch slid over on the seat, and Sam got behind the wheel. "How old was he now, thirteen, fourteen?" He experimented with the stick shift for a moment, then drove them smoothly through the gate to a nearby picnic area. Mitch complimented him on his driving as they unloaded the picnic hamper. It wouldn't be long now, he said, before Sam was driving his own car.

The boy shrugged casually. "I wouldn't have much use for one in a place like this, Dad."

"Well, of course, you won't be here by the time you're old enough to vote."

"Of course."

To Mitch, the words seemed an echo of his own voice; something that he had once said pretty much as Sam had said them now. He glanced at Red, and found her looking at him meaningfully.

"I think you'll be through with boarding schools before long, Sam," he heard himself saying. "Red—your Aunt Red and I hope we'll be able to run our business without traveling in another year or two, and then we'll all settle down together."

"Well," Sam said. "I don't care particularly about settling down. I'd just as soon travel as not."

Mitch passed a paper plate of roast beef, murmuring that he needed to get an education before he started traveling. Sam said that Mitch seemed to have managed to combine the two.

"No, I didn't really get an education," Mitch said seriously. "My folks couldn't afford to put me in boarding school, or you can bet they would have."

"What about Aunt Red?"

"What? Oh, well, Aunt Red was just a tot while we were on the road. By the time she was of school age, the family was settled down in one place."
The boy looked gravely from his father to Red. He nodded, as though to himself, and began buttering a roll.
"Good chow," he said. "Did you cook it, Red—Aunt Red, I mean?"
"Why, no, I didn't. They don't allow cooking in the apartment where we are."
"I'll bet you could cook though, couldn't you? I'll bet you can do anything better than a wife could do."
"W-What?" Red stammered. "I, uh, why do you say that?"
"Because Dad has never got married. Again, I mean. You take care of him so good that he doesn't want a wife."
A deep blush had spread over Red's face. She bit her lip, band trembling as she reached for a piece of fruit. In the heavy silence, Sam looked innocently ("too innocently?") at his father.
"I've got the afternoon off, Dad. Want me to show you around or anything?"
"Why don't you show your Aunt Red around, and let me join you later?" Mitch said. "Right now I imagine I'd better make my courtesy visit to the Colonel."
"He's been in the infirmary all week," Sam told him. "But I guess you should drop in on the adjutant. He's sitting in for the Colonel."
"Good. I'll take care of it right now," Mitch said.

He left the car with them, and headed on foot for the ivycovered administration building. Crossing the sunbaked parade ground, he skirted a small group of drilling cadets, in the custody of a red-faced man in sergeant's uniform. They were a punishment squad, apparently. Or, perhaps, an awkward squad. Sweat streaked their straining faces, dripping down to darken the gray of their uniforms. To Mitch they seemed like automatons, moving like a single machine. Yet they did not satisfy the sergeant. With a harsh and unintelligible yell he brought them to a halt, molded them into a dozen-odd sweating statues. Then, pacing up and down in front of them, occasionally thrusting his nose within an inch of some supposed miscreant, he spewed out such a threatening and insulting tirade that even Mitch was a little shocked.

But this was a good school. One of the very best, he thought, as he went up the steps of the administration building. The sons of the southwest's elite were enrolled here, and he had only been able to enter Sam with the help of some of his highly-placed hotel friends. It was good—so how could you knock it? How could you object, after a nonage in bellboys' locker rooms, to the discipline in one of the very best schools?

Certainly, Sam never kicked about it. Sam never kicked about anything, for that matter.

Major Dillingham, the colonel's adjutant, might have been created by a drunken Cruikshank or Hogarth, using the parade-ground sergeant as model. Face bloated and beetcolored, he wobbled up from behind his desk as though floated by the balloon of his belly. He proffered a puffy hand which seemed to compress interminably within Mitch's grasp. Then, he teetered to the door and closed it, his pipistem legs, seeming on the point of snapping at any moment, so thin that their puttees appeared to be wrapped about less than nothing, a kind of embryonic invisibility.

He sat down again. He treated Mitch to what had all the aspects of a sternly penetrating stare, except for the absence of eyes, which were presumably lurking within the puffy foxholes of their lids.
"Mr. Corley," he wheezed heavily. "Mr. Corley. Mr. Mitchell Corley."

Mitch waited, looking at him silently. He could smell something here, something besides the faint aroma of talcum and the osmotic emanations of faulty kidneys.

"Something has come up, Mr. Corley. Something that, uh, must be explained, but which I see no satisfactory explanation for. I was going to take it up with the Colonel, and of course I will have to. There is no alternative, I'm afraid. But hearing that you were visiting Samuel today—a very fine young man, Mr. Corley. One of our best young men—"

"I know that," Mitch said. "What I don't know, Major, is what you're leading up to, and when or if you're going to get to it.

The statement seemed to stun the adjutant. It was meant to. Mitch had always believed that attack was the best defense. He leaned back negligently, as the major puffily collected himself.

"It, uh, came on today's mail, Mr. Corley. Addressed to the Colonel, naturally, but since I am temporarily in charge, I—I find it difficult to understand. Impossible to understand..."
"Go on," Mitch said coldly. But he knew what the trouble was now. "I'm a busy man. Aren't you?"

The major underwent another moment of shock. Then, a faint gleam of malice in his enbunkered eyes, he took an
envelope from a locked drawer and pitched it across the desk. Mitch opened it.

There was a picture inside, a blown-up copy of one. A rogue's gallery front-and-profile photograph of a woman; it listed her police record on the reverse side. Sixteen arrests, sixteen convictions, all for the same crime.

There were no aliases. The woman had always used her legal name.

Mrs. Mitchell Corley.
Fort Worth...
Cowtown. Where the West Begins.

Take it easy here, and people will do you the same kind of favor. Dress as you like. You won't be judged by your dress. That kind of crummy looking fella in Levi's and boots is worth forty million dollars. Do as you like. Do anything you're big enough to do. But be danged sure that you "are" big enough.

Neighboring Dallas started an evil rumor about its rival. Fort Worth was so rustic, the libel ran, that panthers prowled the streets at high noon. Fort Worth promptly dubbed itself the Panther City, and declared the lie was gospel truth.

Certainly, there were panthers in the streets. Kiddies had to have somethin' to play with, didn't they? Aside from that, the cats performed a highly necessary service. Every morning they were herded down to the east-flowing Trinity River, there to drain their bladders into the stream which provided Dallas' water supply.

That was probably why them people over in Dallas had so many nutty ideas. They'd take a few swigs of that panther piss, and pretty soon they were thinking that they were just as good as other people.

... Mitch and his wife Teddy arrived in Fort Worth approximately a month before their son was born. And Mitch—as Teddy declared he must—became the housekeeper for the family.

He felt that he just about had to, for the time being and under the circumstances. Teddy's earning power was far greater than his, and much would be needed for a family of three. Also, he could not dispute with his wife at what he considered a very trying period for her, nor could he ask her to cut down on expenses merely to indulge his vanity.

As a bachelor, living in a furnished room, he had entered marriage with only the vaguest idea of the cost of maintaining a wife and household. A wife like Teddy, that is, and a household governed by her whims. In fact, he never knew, since Teddy did the buying and bill-paying, accepting whatever portion of his earnings he gave her as being "plenty." But it did gradually dawn on him that Teddy was pooping off enormous amounts of money.

Teddy had to have the very best of everything—furniture, food and drink, apparel, living quarters. But that was only the beginning. She would buy a hundred-dollar dress, and discard it after one wearing. She would buy new furnishings, decide that they were "all wrong" and dispose of them for whatever was offered. She would do senselessly extravagant things for Mitch—the purchase, for example, of a dozen pairs of watered-silk pajamas—then pout when he was not properly appreciative.

Mitch had the weird notion at times that Teddy "hated" money, that she felt guilty about having it and was impelled to get rid of it as quickly as possible.

Well, things were going to change, he told himself determinedly. After the baby was born and she had recovered from her pregnancy-inspired goofiness (as he thought of it), little Teddy was going to get squared away fast. That's what the man thought. That wasn't what happened. For one thing, he was immediately enchanted by little Sam—named after his father. For another, Teddy was not enchanted by the baby. It annoyed her. She regarded it as an intruder on a situation which had been just about perfect as it was.

"You're my baby," she told Mitch. "You're all I need."

"But you're his mother," Mitch insisted. "A mother should want to take care of her baby."

"I do. I love taking care of you."

"But goddammit—! I mean, look, honey, why did you have a baby if you felt like this?"

"Because you wanted one. You wanted a baby, so I gave you a baby."

"But—but, Teddy—"

"So now it's your job to take care of him," Teddy continued Sweetly. "You take care of "your" baby, and I'll take care of my baby."

The conversation took place about ten days after Sam's birth, and Teddy had already returned to work. He had awakened in the middle of the night to find her gone from his side and a note pinned to her pillow. He had been so angry that he almost called her employers, and he refrained from doing so only out of fear of embarrassing her.

They didn't know she was married. Her pregnancy, almost undetectable even to Mitch, had gone unnoticed; and
she had gotten her needed time off on the pretext of traveling to the deathbed of a close relative. It was the company's policy not to employ married women. Teddy had strictly enjoined him against ever calling or coming to the place.

Well, anyway. Mitch decided to let things rock along as they were for a while. He loved being with the baby. Someone had to earn the living, and he had no job to go to.

So he became the housekeeper for their apartment, and the full-time nurse for his son. He read a lot. He worked with the dice. On nice days, he loaded Sam into his perambulator and took him out for an airing. As time went on, these walks often wound up in hotel locker-rooms and the back rooms of pool halls and cigar stores, or wherever else a crap game could be found.

Mitch was getting better and better with the dice. He was not nearly as good then as he eventually got to be, but he was good. He banked part of his winnings, contributing the rest to household expenses. That gave him some feeling of independence; at least, he was paying for his own keep. But he was far from satisfied.

Sure, he loved being with the baby, but he couldn't make a career of it. Sure, he was doing fairly good with the dice—but "how" was he doing it? By hanging out in the kind of places that had always been faintly repugnant to him. Cheap, shoddy places; the habitat, as a rule, of cheap shoddy people. Walk into one of those joints ten years from now, and you'd find pretty much the same people there.

They were pikers, bums, the small fry of the nowhere world. Stick around them long enough, and you became a permanent member of the family. If you ever wanted to be in the big time, you had to be where the big-timers were.

Still... what to do about Teddy? He loved Teddy; he wanted her to be happy. He wasn't afraid of her—not exactly, that is—but he shrank from the prospect of annoying her.

As it turned out, he didn't have to do anything about Teddy, because she had also become dissatisfied with the way they were living. She announced abruptly one morning that they were renting a house, and in that house there was going to be a housekeeper or a nurse-housekeeper or whatever the heck was necessary to allow Mitch to take a job.

"I mean it, Mitch!" she said crossly. "I don't care what kind of job it is, but by golly you get one and get it fast!"

"But—but that's what I've been wanting to do, all along!" Mitch exploded. "You're the one that insisted that I stay at home, and—"

"I did not! Anyway, what good is it having you stay at home if I never get to be with you? When I'm working, you're asleep, and when I'm ready for bed you're cleaning house or out walking with the baby or some other crazy thing!"

"I know, but—"

"You'd better stop arguing with me, Mitch Corley! Get yourself a night job like I've got. Then maybe we'll get to see each other from one week end to the next!"

Mitch did as he was told. The job he took—hotel doorman—was not something he would have bothered with ordinarily; it didn't pay enough money. But money wasn't the most important factor at the moment, and there were compensations for the lack of cash.

He wore the hotel's livery, but he was actually employed by the garage-taxi company which serviced the hotel. Thus, since the latter company could hardly hire a supervisor for one man, he was pretty much his own boss. Then (and this was more important to him than he had previously realized) he was no longer addressed as "boy." Lifted out of the category of faceless flunkies, he became a person—a man with a name, who was to be consulted with at least a measure of respect on the vital matters of transportation and the maintenance of ultra-expensive cars.

There was little if anything to do between two and six in the morning, and he could sit in his starter's cubicle and read or chat with the inevitable guests who were afflicted with insomnia. One of his most frequent visitors was an ageless little man, with eyes which bugged enormously behind his thick-lensed glasses and a great mop of wiry iron-gray hair. Early in Mitch's employment, he had introduced himself with a question:

"If you are a doorman," he said, in subtly accented English, "why are you called a starter?"

"I'll look it up," Mitch grinned. "Ask me tomorrow night."

"So." The man nodded, gravely approving, then leaned far over into the starter's cubicle. "Why do you read a book on modern art? Someone has asked you a question about it?"

Mitch said no, he was simply doing it on his own account. He'd heard some ostensibly important people talking
about modern art, and he figured it was something he should know about.

"Then, you are not doing it on your own account. It is only a sop to others."

"We-el, maybe. But not entirely. I mean, how am I going to know whether something interests me unless I'm informed on it?"

The man studied him intently; bobbed the bushy mass of his hair. "We," he said firmly, "shall talk again."

That was Mitch's first meeting with Fritz Steinhopf, M.D., Ph.D. (psychiatry), E.R.A.S.; Heidelberg, the Sorbonne, University College. It was fairly typical of the psychiatrist's introduction to other members of the hotel's staff. Indiscriminately and without apologetic preliminary he had quizzed the resident manager, the haughty head-housekeeper—very much an executive in the hotel world—the superintendent of service, the head chef (another important executive), and various bellboys and clean-up men.

His attitude was one which, in ordinary cases, would have elicited the chilly suggestion that he would be "happier" at some other hotel. But Fritz Steinhopf was very far from being an ordinary case. In addition to his living quarters, he maintained an elaborate professional suite on the mezzanine floor. His patients were among the southwest's most prominent and wealthy, including two of the hotel company's major stockholders.

Mitch wondered why a man of Steinhopf's importance didn't concentrate on his practice, instead of prying into the affairs of people like himself. When the answer finally dawned on him, it did much in the shaping of his own character. One could not, he came to realize, approach every person and situation with a view to immediate gain. To be effective subjectively, a broad objectivity was necessary. Interest and curiosity were not traits to be turned off and on at will. Nothing was ever lost. Knowledge gained at one time could be used at another.

With much idle time on his hands, Mitch was more and more the target of the apparently non-sleeping Steinhopf's insatiable curiosity. And the more that curiosity was exercised, the greater it became. The psychiatrist was completely uninhibited; he could not be brushed off. A little irritated with him one night, Mitch declared that he had to go to lunch. Steinhopf said that he would go also, and he trotted along at Mitch's side to the all-night lunch room.

They ate together almost nightly after that, the psychiatrist stuffing himself with whatever was put in front of him, blandly asking the most intimate questions, occasionally making some comment which by turns enlightened, frightened and infuriated Mitch.

"It is a substitute, this gambling," he said. "A compensatory drive. You are haunted by your father's impotence. He had no such compensating satisfaction. So you provide yourself with one."

"Oh, come off it, Doc," Mitch laughed. "If I was any better in bed, I'd need a harem."

"So. Perhaps. But the fear is still present. A man confident of his prowess, that he is a man, is not dominated by his wife. As you are by yours, my dear Mitch."

"It's not like that at all! I try to be reasonable, of course. She brings most of the money into the family, and she should have something to say about how it's run. But—"

"But she has always earned the major share of the income, has she not? There has been relatively no change. And money is obviously of no importance to her, something to be thrown away. How then does it justify her drive to make you less than a man?"

"Dammit, I told you it wasn't like that! I'm in love with my wife. I want to do everything I can to please her and make her happy."

"That is as it should be," Steinhopf purred. "Assuming, of course, that she does everything she can to please you and make you happy."

"But—!"

"I understand. Believe me I do," the doctor said softly. "I am asking you to accept the unacceptable. You know your wife as no one else can know her. Between you there is something which is singularly your own, a history of troubles shared, of secret words and intimacies; the warm and delightful and always unique treasure which is peculiar to every marriage, no matter how bad that marriage may be. The husband is always the last to know, they say. Of course, he is. How else could it be, since he is closer to his wife than anyone else? But consider, Mitch. It is this very closeness which blinds him to the truth. It is almost impossible for him to be objective. A Negro patient once assured me with great bitterness that I did not know what it was like to be a Negro. I could only point out that he also didn't know what it was like to be a white man."

Mitch frowned. It seemed to him that the doctor had almost said something decidedly ugly.
Steinhopf smoothly continued. "Aside from your intensely subjective viewpoint, there is the matter of your childhood; the marriage of your parents. You grew up in circumstances which were anything but normal, so your present home life does not seem as shocking as it essentially is. Nor is your wife too blatant a contrast with your mother. Your mother seems to have been lacking in most of the instincts normal to a mother, while simultaneously possessing an over-supply of certain other womanly instincts. So Teddy, by comparison—"

Mitch got up and stomped out of the place. The doctor caught up with him, trotted along at his side. They would talk again, he said imperturbably. They would talk again, many times, for there was much indeed to be discussed.

At the moment, Mitch had other ideas on the subject. He'd just about had it with Steinhopf. But they did talk again, many times and at length, and at Mitch's own wish. Because he was getting very worried about Teddy himself.

He still loved her, or believed that he did, but their relationship was becoming increasingly unsatisfactory. The more he saw of her the more dismayed he became.

And he was seeing a great deal of her. Literally, constantly. She took him to bed the minute he came home. The normally delightful demands she made upon him had, through excess, become a source of despair and disgust. She couldn't carry on a conversation—not a real honest-to-Hannah conversation. "Why hadn't he noticed that before?"

What he had taken for wit was really the product of ignorance (she didn't realize she was being funny) and the parroted statements of others.

Actually, she was almost completely humorless. Joking with her, laughing in her presence, could induce her to insane fury.

He'd better not laugh at her! Very bad things happened to daddies who laughed at their mammas.

She paid no attention to little Sam, and she was angrily jealous when he did. She wanted one thing of Mitch—over and over and over. And when he could not deliver it, she was peevish, pouting... yet with a kind of smugness, an air of self-satisfaction.

So Mitch's talks with Dr. Steinhopf resumed. In detail, he poured out the story of himself and Teddy from the very beginning.

"I guess I was supposed to be another guy," he explained, with attempted humor. "Someone she was engaged to before I came along. I remember she was crying in her sleep the night we were married, mumbling about getting a letter from the general and everyone telling her this other fellow was dead."

Steinhopf said that he doubted very much that there had been any other fellow, in the context of Mitch's meaning, or any general. The other fellow was a sexual fantasy. The general represented authority trying to destroy the fantasy.

"You mean," Mitch frowned, "she's insane?"

"My dear Mitch, please do not use that word in my presence! Let us say she is not normal—in the accepted sense of that misused term."

"The poor kid," Mitch said bewilderedly. "I just can't understand it...."

Steinhopf shrugged. "She is a classic case, I would say, of a not uncommon disorder among American women. You could find less exaggerated and complex examples all around you. Where are its roots? In a dominant mother, of course, and a defeated but beloved father. Mingle with these the factor of penis-envy—a younger neighbor's boy, perhaps, and the childhood pastime of playing house. Add in large sums of money—the nominal proof, sad to say, of superiority—and the urges normal to woman. This, broadly speaking, would give you your Teddy... I believe. To be conclusive or helpful, I would have to see her over an extended period of time, an obvious impossibility."

"Well," Mitch hesitated. "If it was just a matter of money..."

"Always," the psychiatrist said gravely, "a fee of some kind is necessary. What is given for nothing, I find, is usually valued at that. But it would be no problem, I assure you. Five dollars, say, for what I would ordinarily charge a hundred. The problem is that your wife would not see me. She would become very angry at the suggestion that there was a problem. Or do you say otherwise?" Steinhopf waited a moment, then continued. "Sexual degeneracy is a way of life with her. The right way. She has no desire to change it. The tendency,—another delicate pause—"has always been to expand it."

Mitch felt himself reddening, as the doctor's words slowly sank in on him. Steinhopf spread his hands apologetically.

"Is not the evidence all around you, Mitch? A woman of Patently limited mentality, who allegedly earns an
extravagant salary? The peculiar working conditions? The voracious demands upon you? The constant—"

"Thank you, Doctor," Mitch said coldly. "Thank you, very much."

"Please, Mitch. For your own sake..."

Mitch turned his back on him. He kept it turned.

But he could not forget what the doctor had said. He could not allay the suspicions which, as Steinhopf had guessed, were already in his mind. He was very wrong to have them, he knew. It was hateful and ungrateful to think such terrible things about the mother of his son. Finally, he persuaded himself that he owed it to Teddy to find out the truth.

Mitch took his days off from work in the ordinary way, during the week in which they occurred. Teddy allowed hers to accumulate, taking them during the five days of the month which menstruation made difficult for her. Thus, he had the opportunity to follow her, and since she was not looking to be followed it was shamefully easy.

He knew the place she went to, not from personal experience but from informed hearsay. Still, however, he would not believe what was obviously a fact. There had to be some innocent explanation. Teddy would have gone there on some entirely honest errand, and she would not go back again.

He waited outside; waited for hours. She did not come out. So he followed her again the next night—still stubbornly resisting the truth—and that time he went in.

It was a well-run place. A partitioned tunnel extended a few feet inside the door, and an ape-like figure, with a sawedoff ball bat under his arm, stood at its end.

"No booze, no rough stuff," he recited, giving Mitch a quick frisk. "Okay, you're welcome."

He stood aside to let Mitch enter. In the hallway, seated at a desk which guarded without blocking the stairs to the second floor—for this "was" a well-run place, you know—was a polite, pudgy little man in a neat serge suit.

"No booze, no rough stuff," he smiled. "What can I do for you, sir?"

Mitch told him. The man hesitated. "I think you must mean Neddy, don't you, sir? Yes, I'm sure you must. Oh, no, please!" He gestured distastefully as Mitch reached for his wallet. "The gratuity must be left with the young lady."

Mitch sat down in a row of chairs with three other clients. They kept looking at one another and looking away again. As they were permitted to ascend the stairs, other men were coming through the entrance tunnel, each greeted with a frisk and a singsonged, "No booze, no rough stuff..."

At last the man at the desk smiled and nodded at Mitch. Mitch started up the stairs, and the man said that Neddy could be found at the first door on his right.

"A preferred room, sir. And a very special young lady."

"Thank you," Mitch mumbled.

He was getting the Class-A treatment, he guessed. He was a more likely-looking customer than they usually got, and they wanted him back.

At the head of the stairs, he paused and drew a long shuddery breath. Then, he opened the muslin-covered screen door on his right and went in.

He was hardly breathing; unable to breathe. Nervously, he caught the door, letting it close without a sound. He dragged his eyes to the bed, made himself look and almost shouted with relief.

The girl was lying on her stomach, head pillowed on her arms. In the subdued light, her naked body was a shadow carved of ivory. A beautiful but vaguely limned shadow. It was only a little more clear to him than her face.

But he "could" see her hair, hair that by no stretch of the imagination could be Teddy's. A long page-boy bob trailing to her shoulders—and black! Coal black.

Fine beads of sweat broke out on Mitch's forehead. He was relieved, oh, God, was he relieved, but what the hell did he do now?

Obviously, he couldn't do what a patron was expected to do. But what was the alternative? What would this girl think or do, and what about that guy downstairs with the baseball bat?

He didn't know what would be an acceptable course of conduct. Almost as far back as he could remember, he had been hearing about places like this in the frankest detail. But he had never been in one. He didn't know what a customer who "wasn't" a customer was supposed to do.
Looking for a way out, some clue to getting off the hook, he let his eyes rove the room.

On the mirrorless dresser stood a white crockery water pitcher and a washbowl of the same color and material. Conveniently nearby was a small cardboard box of purplish disinfectant; the so-called snakebite remedy, soluble crystals of potassium permanganate. The washbowl was tinged with traces of purple. There were also smudges of purple on the towels which half-filled the basket at the side of the dresser.

In addition to a chair, and of course the bed, there was one other item of furniture. A large white chamber-pot. It was about half full like the towel basket—what could be more logical?—and its yellowish contents were also veined with the purple of potassium permanganate.

A well-run place. A house with a social conscience.

Mitch’s lips quirked in a nervous smile. The smile began to spread. Then, the girl turned over on the bed. She sat up and stared at him.

She was a very wholesome-looking girl, with a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. The change in her appearance wrought by the black page-boy wig was incredible.

Mitch gulped. His emotions locked on the delicate gear between comedy and tragedy, the hideous and the hilarious. Then, there was a kind of inward back-thrust, the “kick” of a mechanism that had built up more compression than it was meant to handle. And he began to laugh.

He laughed as though his life depended upon laughing well, as, in a sense, it did. He was still laughing, laughing and weeping, when Teddy got up and slugged him with the pisspoT.
The major was waiting, studying Mitch with a mixture of malice and—and what? Envy? Hunger? Mitch's mind raced, trying to probe the other man's soul and brain. Meanwhile, the major felt forced to speak.

"A very fine young man, Samuel. I am truly sorry that he will not be able to continue here."

"Why won't he?" Mitch said.

"Oh, now really, Mr. Corley. This is a very select school, as you know. To have a student whose mother is a, uh—uh—well, you must see that it's impossible."

"Why? The semester will be ended in less than three months. Just why can't he remain here for that length of time?"

The major's mouth worked wordlessly, a man trying to explain the axiomatic. At last, with a helpless gesture, he placed the matter in purely practical terms. Yet his visitor remained unimpressed.

"But no one knows you received this, Major. That's right, isn't it? If the question should ever arise—and it won't—there's no way to prove that you received it."

"But—but I know, Mr. Corley. I, uh, know and my duty is painfully clear."

Mitch said that he didn't see it that way at all, and he was sure that the major wouldn't if he thought things through. The major's first duty was toward his students. And how could duty be interpreted as the punishment of a student for the wrong-doing of a parent?

"You're a man of the world, Major; I can see that. I'll bet you've had a fling or two yourself, haven't you?" Mitch smiled engagingly. "A man right in his prime as you are can still enjoy a juicy taste of life. He knows what life's about. There are certain rules to observe, of course, but he certainly isn't going to embarrass someone like myself, another man of the world, because of a youthful mistake."

The major coughed. His swollen flesh shifted inside the tan uniform, straightening and readjusting its mass, trying to remold itself into some semblance of the trim figure that sat across the desk.

"As you say, Mr. Corley—huh-huh. These things do happen to the very best of us fellers. Oh, yes, "huh-huh". There was a girl in the Philippines—" He broke off in sudden alarm. "Now, Mr. Corley! I really can't see—"

"No one knows about this." Mitch said steadily. "No one but you and I. There's not a reason in the world why anyone else has to know it."

"But—but what are you suggesting?"

"I can't enter Sam in another school at this late date. If he's forced to leave here, he'll lose an entire semester's work. Now, I was reading an article the other day on the cash value of an education to a boy. I don't remember what the overall figure was, but I think that if you broke it down a semester would be worth about... two thousand dollars?"

The major stared at him dazedly. He looked down at the band that was being held out to him, heard Mitch murmur that he'd have to be running along. The major shook the hand and withdrew his own palm. Felt the flat-folded crispness that was like no other feeling.

It was done, then, so easily and smoothly; a gracious thing that could only be undone ungraciously. He wobbled upright on his wretched legs, hardly at all discomfited, the benefactor rather than the benefacted, seeking the words appropriate to one man of the world when addressing another.

"We must get together again, Mr. Corley. Two fellers like us, heh? And, uh, let me repeat that we are most happy to number Samuel among our students. We shall, uh, hope that he shall be back with us again next year."

"That's very nice of you," Mitch smiled.

But he was thinking, "The hell Sam will be back here another year! Not in the same place with a character like you!" And then, leaving the office, going down the steps of the administration building, he was fairer about it.

He was used to giving bribes; the major clearly wasn't used to accepting them. The poor ineffectual bastard had been flattered and persuaded by an expert, honestly convinced no doubt that he had only cooperated in an act of good will. And... who knew? Who knew? Perhaps he also had a nemesis who would make him do things he would never ordinarily do? A dogged and vicious creditor, a disease which impelled the life it was destroying to a last desperate tasting of life, a woman who had had him hunted down just when he thought he had it made...
He knew now that he should have leveled with Red when Teddy first reappeared in his life. But he was afraid of losing her—he and Red hadn't been together very long at the time. And even with Red knowing and accepting the truth, there would still have been Sam to protect. How could you tell a kid, or let him be told, that his mother was a whore, that she hated him? How would he take it? How could you risk the terrible damage that it might do to him?

He could divorce Teddy, naturally, but that would accomplish nothing. Divorced, she could do just as much as she was doing now. Divorce would crack the whole nasty mess wide open, destroying everything that he had been trying to preserve.

Sighing, he pushed the problem to the back of his mind, putting on a bright face as he came up to Red and Sam. They strolled across to the campus lake together, remained there talking and skipping stones across the water until late afternoon. Then, they returned to the car, and with Sam waving good-bye, Red and Mitch started back to Houston.

Red was looking a little glum, depressed as she always was after leaving Sam. Mitch suggested stopping someplace for a drink and dinner, but Red wasn't hungry. He gave her a brief one-armed hug, knowing what was coming but knowing of no way to head it off. She led into it by a new route, telling him that she thought Sam knew the true nature of the relationship between them.

Mitch shook his head firmly. "You mean you think he suspects that you're not really his aunt, don't you?"

"Well, yes. But—"

"But that doesn't mean he suspects anything else. No," he went on. "I think it's more a matter of wishful-thinking on his part than anything else. He likes you. He'd like to have you for a mother. Therefore, he wishes you weren't his aunt."

Red was silent for a moment. Then she said quietly but flatly that she wanted to be Sam's mother.

"Now, Mitch. Let's get married right away. We've got more than a hundred thousand dollars, haven't we? That certainly should be enough to—to—"

"To what?" Mitch said. "Just what do we know about anything except what we are doing?"

"Well—well, we can learn, can't we? My gosh, other people do, and they don't have a hundred thousand dollars either!"

"We're not other people. We've been living high off the hog for a long, long time, and I think we'd have one hell of a time doing a complete right about-face. As I see it, and you've been seeing it the same way, we'd just about have to have enough to retire on. To retire comfortably. Or at least enough to look around on and find something solid before we jump into it."

"But a quarter of a million dollars, honey! Do we really need that much?"

"We agreed on it. We decided that we'd need every penny of it."

Red said crossly that they could undecide then. There wasn't a real reason in the world why they couldn't get married right now... unless, that is, Mitch no longer wanted to marry her.

"You know better than that!" Mitch said sharply. "My God, what a nasty thing to say!"

"Well... I'm sorry, Mitch. I didn't really mean it, of Course."

"I should think so!" -

"But—but couldn't we do it, honey? Please?"

"Of course we can," Mitch said. "But—wait now, Red! Wait a minute! We get married, and then what? Yank Sam out of school?"

"Why, no. Why would we want to do that?"

"But we'd at least have to have some kind of home where he could visit us. And an income to support that home; something legit. Or did you think we could go on with the dice hustle?"

"Oh, of course not, silly! But..."

"Well, then? Were you just planning to go up to the school and tell Sam we were married, period? I don't quite see what it'll accomplish, but if that's what you want..."

Red told him snappishly to just shut up, for God's sake. He was so darned smart, he ought to hang a medal on himself. Then, after a moment or two, she laughed and patted his cheek.

"Sorry, darling. You're right, of course. It's just that when a person wants something so much—"
"We both want it, and we're going to have it, too," Mitch said warmly. "Who knows? Houston is a good town. Maybe we'll make it right here."

"I'd be satisfied to just make a good chunk of it."

"I think perhaps we should be kind of preparing Sam for the good news," Mitch went on, giving things a good push while they were going his way. "Maybe we should drop a hint or two that you're not really his aunt, that you were a distant relative, say, who was adopted by my family."

Red said that she guessed they probably should do that. It might be kind of a shock to Sam to tell him abruptly that they were married.

"I know, Mitch!" She turned to him, eyes shining. "We'll have him come to the wedding! He can be the best man!"

"Wonderful," Mitch said, basking in her happiness, hating himself for his deceit. "I can hardly wait, honey."

They reached their apartment early in the evening. Despite his near exhaustion, he again slept badly. The following forenoon, on the grounds of having to see his tax accountant, he drove into the downtown business district.

At the bank, he found he had guessed right about the amount in his safe-deposit box. It contained only three thousand dollars. Three thousand out of the approximate one hundred and twenty-five thousand that it should have held. He took the six five-hundred-dollar bills, bought an equivalent amount of cashier's checks and mailed them to Teddy.

It had been more than a month since he last sent her money. But he had pointed out at the time that he was sending a considerably larger amount than her regular exorbitant stipend, and that it would have to do her for at least six weeks. He had hoped in this way to get her off his mental back for a while, to free himself of the constant fear and danger of being late with a payment, and what invariably happened if he was late. Now, he knew he had made a colossal blunder.

Teddy had cracked down on Sam, anyway. Without warning, she had thus notified her husband that the payments had gone up. He had proved that he could pay a larger amount, so henceforth he would have to go on doing it.

Driving back to the apartment, Mitch was suddenly struck by the terrifying knowledge that he would have to make another payoff to Teddy in approximately two weeks. By her reckoning, he would "owe" it to her then, and he would have to get it up or else. And barring a miracle, he simply couldn't do it.

He saw a drive-in restaurant just ahead of him. Turning into it, he ordered coffee; sipped it slowly while he did some rapid mental arithmetic.

Five thousand dollars. That was roughly the amount he had laid on the line at the hotel-apartment. Then, there was the three thousand he had been cheated of at Zearsdale Country Club. Plus a two-grand bribe to the major at Sam's school. And another three thousand this morning to Teddy.

It added up to an incredible thirteen thousand dollars. Thirteen thousand in less than three days!

He had been close-run to begin with, with really less than he needed to enter a big game. But he could have made out all right, despite the five grand at the apartment. It had been that extra eight thousand that had put him under the gun—the club loss, and the bribe, and the money to Teddy. He hadn't counted on that. Which was stupid of him. In this racket, a man always had to anticipate the disasters which he had no logical reason to fear.

Now... well, just how much cash on hand did he have?

He started to take out his wallet, then firmly thrust it back into his pocket. There was no point in knowing the exact amount. Whatever it was, it would have to be enough. It "would" be enough.

It always had been, and it would be now.

Driving on to the apartment house, he felt unreasonably cheerful. The fatalistic cheerfulness of a man who has survived the worst that can be handed to him. In the lobby of the building, he ran into Turkelson, who greeted him with the news that Winfield Lord was checking in early. Lord would be there the following night, axiomatically ready for a game. Mitch said that he would go for it—with certain cooperation from Turkelson. The manager happily agreed to give it to him.

So the mood of cheerfulness grew. Stepping onto the elevator, Mitch assured himself that the pendulum was now swinging the other way. He would make a killing here in Houston. He could look forward to nothing but good from now on.
Bad beginning, good ending. Everything bad that could possibly happen had already happened.

It was an excellent hotel-apartment, needless to say. Perfectly insulated to accommodate its airconditioning. Soundproofed. A monument to luxury which neither admitted nor emitted noise.

Thus, Mitch had no warning. Not the slightest. He simply stepped into the penthouse and found Jake Zearsdale waiting for him.
He was aware that Red was in the room, but he couldn't look at her. He was aware that she was saying something, but he couldn't hear it. It wouldn't register on him. All his senses were concentrated on Zearsdale.

For an endless moment, he stood stock still, barely across the threshold. He was frozen there, unable to speak or move. Then, the inner man took over, and the voice of experience spoke to him—"always take the initiative, always face up to the danger". And frowning politely, he advanced on the oil man and held out his hand.

"I hardly expected to see you again, Mr. Zearsdale," he said coolly. "Red, why don't you give our guest a drink?"

"She already has, Mr. Corley." Zearsdale gestured toward a side table. "Your sister has been very good to me. I only hope"—his broad mouth parted in a smile—"that you'll be equally pleasant. Not that I'd blame you much if you weren't."

"My sister and I are always polite to guests," Mitch said. "We were taught to be as children. Apparently, that isn't a teaching that penetrated your country club, is it?"

Zearsdale's heavy face darkened. His sharp eyes glittered coldly, seeming to whet themselves on Mitch's eyes. Then, he laughed with the sound of ice tinkling on fine crystal.

"Mr. Corley," he said. "I came here instead of calling because I was afraid you might refuse to accept my call, and What I have to say is important. Now, do I get to sit back down, or are you going to make me speak my piece standing up?"

"Of course, you're going to sit down," Mitch smiled, dropping the offended bit. "Let's freshen your drink a little, too." He carried the glass over to the bar where Red took charge. She brought him a drink also when she delivered Zearsdale's.

Mitch studied the oil man as the latter took an incongruously delicate sip. Zearsdale wasn't covering up, obviously. As he had proved at the club, he behaved pretty much as he felt, not at all moved by the constraints which governed ordinary mortals. Unfriendly, he had shown it. Now, since he was showing friendliness...

"I came here to apologize," Zearsdale said. "John Birdwell—he's the man who won that three thousand from you—was cheating."

"I see," Mitch nodded.

"Would you mind telling me how you caught on to it, Mr. Corley?"

"It was pretty plain." Mitch shrugged lightly. "He kept rolling fours and sixes and eights. Never anything but those three numbers. There had to be something wrong."

"And you accused him of cheating just on that basis? That sounds pretty risky."

"I thought it was pretty clear-cut. Particularly when he used his dice hand to reach into his pocket." Mitch paused to light a cigarette. "What tipped you off?"

"We-el..." Zearsdale hesitated. "Maybe it would be easier to explain if I told you something about Birdwell. He worked for me, you know. Assistant vice-president."

"I believe I'd heard something to that effect."

"I don't pay my people big salaries, Mr. Corley. Not what you and I think of as big. There's just not much point to it, you know, the way taxes are, and it doesn't give them the feeling of being part of what they're working for. It's much better all around, as I see it, to give them stock options to be taken up at staggered intervals. In other words... but I'm sure I don't have to explain all this to you."

Mitch said easily that perhaps he'd better, if it was necessary for Red and him to understand it. "Sis and I are much better at spending than earning."

"Put it this way, then," Zearsdale went on. "Johnny—Mr. Birdwell, that is—had been with me for seventeen years. During that time, he received increasingly large stock options. They were better than money, you understand. Every dollar put into them was worth more than two. So Johnny should have been a wealthy man, comfortably fixed at least. But you started me to thinking about him, and I ran a fast check, and I discovered that what he had was hardly dime one. Let it all slip away from him in one way or another..."

The oil man frowned heavily, seemingly as much offended as bewildered by Birdwell's bad management. He continued:
"Yes, Johnny was broke. But he had another one hundred thousand dollar stock option due him in a few days, and he'd already notified me that he was picking it up. Well..." Zearsdale spread his hands. "There it was. Last night I took him into a private room at the club, and searched him. He was using crooked dice, just as you said."

Mitch shot a quick glance at Red. He frowned unconsciously. "I'm sorry if I caused any trouble," he said.

"Any trouble he has is his own fault," Zearsdale said. "You're the injured party, not him, and I'm going to make it up to you..."

He explained how he was going to do it. Mitch choked on an incredulous laugh, and a faint frown puckered the oil man's brow.

"I say something funny?" he said. "Your sister seemed very pleased by it."

"I'm sorry," Mitch said. "We appreciate your offer, of course, but naturally we couldn't accept it."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Because we couldn't! I mean, it's impossible. It's the same as making us a gift of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

Zearsdale murmured that it wasn't the same at all. He owed them something for the embarrassment he had caused them and for exposing Birdwell as a cheat. By allowing them to pick up Birdwell's stock option, at less than half its market value, he was only repaying a debt.

"You're not depriving anyone of anything, Mr. Corley. The option's there. If you don't pick it up, it will simply lapse."

"I'm sorry." Mitch shook his head. "I'm sorry, but we just couldn't."

He lighted a cigarette, taking his time about it. Very carefully, he shook out the match. A little weakly, he again repeated that he was sorry. Avoiding Red's eyes; the pained and furious question that was in them.

"You were saying," Zearsdale persisted, "that you and your sister didn't know much about business. Now, if you'd like to consult your banker..."

"No, no," Mitch smiled quickly. "It isn't that at all."

"But you won't accept the offer? I guess I don't understand that kind of pride, Mr. Corley. But if that's the way you feel..."

He put down his glass, and suddenly stood up. With a cold nod, he started toward the door. And then Red was abruptly across the room, apologetically touching his arm.

"Please, Mr. Zearsdale. My brother doesn't mean to be stuffy, but, well, our funds are pretty well tied up. Invested. We—well, it might be rather difficult to—to—"

Mitch silently cursed her, even as Zearsdale's face cleared and became friendly.

"Oh," he said. "Well, I can understand that. How long do you think it would take you to shake loose, Mr. Corley?"

"I'm not sure," Mitch said. "I'm not sure it would pay me to shake loose at all."

"For a hundred and fifty thousand dollars? Nonsense!" The oil man laughed firmly. "You just put your banker in touch with me. He'll go for it, regardless of what your set-up is."

Mitch said that he would see about it. What the hell else was there to say, after Red had booby-trapped him?

"Then it's all settled," Zearsdale said. "You call me in a couple of days, okay?"

"Okay, Mitch said, "and thanks very much."

They walked to the door together. As they shook hands, a curious expression flickered briefly across Zearsdale's face. The look of a man who has been struck by a sudden and implausible notion. Then, it was gone and he was gone, and Mitch slowly closed the door.

Red was fixing herself a drink. She tasted it, and turned around to face him.

"Well?" she said, "Well, Mitch?"

"Too bad," Mitch said easily. "I wish it had been as good as it sounded, honey."

"You mean it wasn't? Zearsdale was making all that talk just to stay in practice?"

Mitch chuckled fondly. "Now, baby. Even you ought to know that a guy isn't going to make us a present of one
“What do you mean, even me?” Her eyes flashed. “Just how stupid am I supposed to be, anyway?”

“Let's drop it,” Mitch said. “Let's just for God's sake drop it!”

Red shook her head angrily. “I asked you a question, Mitch, and I want an answer. Why did you turn Zearsdale down? Because it would have forced your hand—given us all the money you say we have to have to get married?”

“What?” Mitch snorted. “Now, what kind of sense does that make?”

“You heard me. Yesterday we needed a quarter of a million dollars to pull out of this racket and settle down. A hundred grand plus what we have on hand. So today it falls right into our lap, and you give it the brush. No reason. You don't ask me what I think. You just—”

“I didn't think I had to ask you. You've always said that I was the boss.”

“Well...” She slowed down a little. “Well, you always have been, Mitch. But...”

“But now I'm not?” He felt her weakening and pressed the point. “It has to be one way or the other, Red.”

She looked at him hesitantly, then put down her glass and came swiftly to him. Standing on tiptoe, she brushed her lips against his, then stepped back, frowning slightly at the calculated coolness of his kiss.

“It shouldn't have to be that way, Mitch. Not if you really love me.”

“Are you saying that I don't?”

“It's not what I'm saying that matters. Mitch. It's what you're not saying. Just because I don't demand explanations doesn't mean that you shouldn't offer them.”

Her reasonableness was infuriating. Mitch said for God's sake, how many times did he have to tell her? “I don't think Zearsdale was leveling. I don't know what he's trying to pull or why, but I'm certainly not going to take practically our last dollar and hand it over to him!”

“But he told you to consult your banker,” Red pointed out. “He surely wouldn't have done that if he was pulling a fast one.”

“How do you know he wouldn't? What do you know about business?”

He pushed past her and went to the bar. Dumping whiskey into a glass, he brooded savagely that this was really too damned much. He was so near broke that his backbone was snapping at his belly button, and he was being crowded for dough from all sides. And now Red was throwing her weight around. Demanding an explanation for the inexplicable. Adding to the agony of losing the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity which Zearsdale had offered.

He turned back around from the bar, again found himself facing Red. “Well?” he said. “Any more nutty questions?”

“Don't you get sarcastic with me, Mitch!”

“Well, don't act like a damned fool, then! I—"Ouch!" he said, for Red had suddenly slapped him. "Why the hell did you do that?”

“I'll do it again if you call me a damned fool! My mother took that guff all her life but I'm not going to!”

“What? What the hell has your mother got to do with it?”

“And you just stop cursing me, too!”

“But goddammit, I—”

Red slapped him again. Mitch grabbed her, hauled her kicking and squirming to the lounge, and turned her over his knee. Jerking up her housecoat, he gave her bare bottom a resounding "whack!"

“Now, let's knock it off,” he said, jerking her upright again. “We forget Zearsdale, get me? It's all over, "kaput!""

“Oh, no it isn't,” Red said. "Don't you kid yourself it is, Mr. Mitch Corley!"

Her red hair was tumbled around her face. She tossed it back, her breasts swelling and trembling as she fought to control herself.

“I'll tell you when it'll be over, Mitch. When you answer just one question for me. Do we or don't we have more than a hundred thousand dollars put away?”

“Wh-aat?” he laughed shakily. "What kind of a crazy question is that?"

“Answer me, Mitch!”
"But it doesn't make sense! You've been with me all these years. How could I have blown more than a hundred grand on myself?"

The question threw her for a moment. "Well," she said, "I didn't say that you had spent it on yourself. But—"

"Well, I should hope not! I've always given you better than I've taken for myself. Everything I've done has been for you. Why, my God, honey—"

"Wait!" She cut him off with a gesture. "Just tell me the truth, Mitch. That's all I ask—just the truth. Do we have the money?"

"Yes!" he snapped. "Yes, yes, yes!" He snatched the key to the safe-deposit box from his pocket. "It's right here in town! Do you want me to take you down and show it to you?"

Red looked down at the key. She brought her eyes up to look into his. "Yes," she said.

"But—You do?"

Red nodded evenly. "I don't think you're telling the truth, Mitch. So, yes, I do want you to take me to the bank and show me the money."

Mitch shook his head. "I don't think you know what you're saying, Red. We have to trust each other. If we don't, we can't operate together."

"I know that. I was wondering if you did."

Mitch shrugged. He said all right, if that was the way she wanted it.

"That's the way I want it," Red said.

"Very well." He consulted his watch. "We can have lunch somewhere along the way. Or would you rather have a bite here?"

"We'll eat later," Red said. "After I've seen that dough. And before you can con me out of seeing it."
There was a certain banker in Houston. There is a certain banker in almost every large city. His position will be one of importance, an assistant-cashier, or better. Technically, he does nothing illegal—although discovery can cost him his job—yet he reaps heavily from the operators.

Perhaps they invented him—the con men, the blue-sky operators, the hustlers and high-flying gamblers. Perhaps they merely discovered him. The question is akin to the chicken or the egg riddle. At any rate, in the coming together of him and his clients, almost never the bank's clients, there is a profitable conjunction of their necessity and his opportunity.

His charges are extremely high, not only because of the risk to his job but because his clients have to have him, in certain kinds of hustles, whereas he does not have to have them. So they can pay what he asks or go to hell. But assuming that they are willing to pay...

Want to move a sight draft in an hour? The banker can do it for you.
Want to impress a chump? The banker will treat you like a long-lost brother.
Want to show a bundle of flash? The banker will benevolently count it out for you. (But don't try to walk away with it.)

In Fort Worth, not so many years ago, a rag mob played a rancher against the wall for seventy-five big ones. It was a bald swindle, and the lads wound up where all bad hustlers go. But not the banker, the key man in the framis. There was no provable crime to pin on him.

... Mitch got the car out, and was waiting for Red when she came down. As they drove into the city, he sensed her occasional sidewise looks. The doubt that his calmness was producing in her. But he said nothing, and she remained stubbornly silent.

He put the car on the bank's parking lot. Helping her out politely, he escorted her into the bank. And here at last she began to weaken. Red didn't know anything about banks. Her only contact with them had been indirect and unpleasant—their more or less constant harassment of her father's family.

"Mitch..." She shivered slightly in the vaulted vastness. "Let it go, honey."

Mitch said it was too late to let it go—and it was. Taking her by the arm, he steered her firmly toward the railed-off enclosure occupied by upper-echelon executives, and stopped at the desk of an assistant vice-president.

The man's name was Agate, a middling middle-aged man with colorless lips, rimless glasses and a thinly-haired scalp that was as pink as a baby's bottom.

"Why, yes," he said, accepting the key to the safe-deposit box. "I'll be glad to handle this for you. If you'll just sit down, please..."

They sat down, and he departed. Mitch took out a package of cigarettes, proffered one to Red. She refused with a nervous little jerk of her head, and he lit one for himself.

Agate returned. He placed an oblong box on the desk, then withdrew a few feet so that they could have a kind of privacy. Mitch picked up the box, and turned it upside down.

The flash tumbled out of the desk, a cascade of large-denomination bills. Leaning back, he told Red to start counting.

"Aah, no, Mitch..." She gave her head another little jerk. "Let's just get out of here."

"Count it!" he insisted.

She gave him a pleading look, an angrily pleading look. She picked up a packet of bills, and laid it down again. Blindly, she picked up another pack, gave it a clumsy push toward the first. Then, with an almost desperate motion, she stood up.

"Mitch..." A begging whisper. "Please, honey."

"Yes?" he said. "You mean you're satisfied?"

"Yes! Yes, I am, darn you!"

"Well..."

"Please! Please come on."
Mitch said he would have to wait for the money to be put away, and the key returned to him. Red said that she would meet him at the car. And she left hastily, not looking back.

He followed her after a few minutes. She obviously felt miserable, ashamed of herself, but he could take no comfort in his triumph. It had cost too much. He loved her too much.

As they neared the apartment house, he told her that he was going to let her go up by herself; and she looked at him frightened. But he smiled reassuringly.

"We both need to get pulled together a little. So let's do it, and then we'll forget it ever happened."

Red bit her lip, blinking back the tears. She told him not to be so d-damned nice. "It's your own fault, d-doggone you! Y-You—you sh-shouldn't have—"

"I shouldn't have asked you to take me on trust," Mitch agreed smoothly. "I'll never do it again, baby."

"'Wha-at?"' She turned on him, blazing. "Don't you dare say that!"

"But you—"

"Hush! You just hush!"

She almost ran into the apartment house, legs flashing in their seamless hose.

Mitch drove back to town.

In a secluded booth of a swank restaurant, he met and lunched with Agate, explaining the potential deal with Zearsdale and asking for help in swinging it. Agate considered it, munching a bite of cherry torte. When he had swallowed it and taken a sip of coffee, he shook his head.

"No can do, Mitch. The deal would have to go through the bank, which would mean references, et cetera, or heavy collateral."

"But the stock's collateral in itself."

"Oh, come on, now. You don't have the stock until the money's been transferred."

"But you can keep it all in escrow. When you pay the money, you take the stock. Where's the risk in that?"

Agate conceded that there wasn't any. But it was still no soap. "It's one of those things you can do if you already have money, Mitch. If you were the substantial citizen, that is, that Zearsdale thinks you are. As it is, well, they'd try to check it out with him, which would start him to checking on you. And you'd probably wind up with something you wouldn't like."

Mitch grinned wryly. "A hell of a note, isn't it, Lee? If I want to throw a curve, you're my boy. But I bring you something strictly legit, and you're not at home."

"Mmm-mmm." Agate had filled his mouth again. "Good lunch, Mitch."

"Lee... I could move the whole thing in one day. Get the money from you in the morning, cash in the stock, and have it back to you by closing time."

"'Whuh!'" The banker sprayed crumbs from his mouth, eyes bulging with horror. "Don't say things like that, Mitch!"

"I'd cut the juice right through the center, Lee. Seventyfive G's for each of us."

"Don't! Not another word!" Agate shuddered visibly. "My God, man! How could you even ask me to take a hundred thousand dollars of the bank's money, and turn it over to a— uh—"

Mitch knew it was no use, yet something beyond the knowledge pushed him on. "You know me, Lee. You know I wouldn't pull a fast one on you..."

"No, Mitch. No, no, no!"

"Why, hell, you could go along with me for that matter. What could be more logical? Seventy-five grand just for taking a little walk with me!"

"No, sir! I don't walk anywhere with the bank's money!"

"Well, use your own, then. You could raise it, couldn't you? Well? It's the chance of a lifetime, Lee! Seventy-five thousand dollars for doing absolutely nothing!"

"Nothing?" Agate laughed a little angrily. "Putting up a hundred thousand is nothing?"

"Not for a man like you. Not in view of your profit."
"Well..."

Mitch saw that he was weakening. Glory to God, he was weakening. And taking very careful aim, he threw in the hook.

"Well, forget it, Lee. There's a couple of other prospects I can probably get it from."

"No, now wait!" Agate said. "I—I think I can do it. It's eighty-five thousand net, right? Actually eighty-five instead of a hundred."

"Eighty-five? What do you—" Mitch broke off. "Oh, yes. I promised you fifteen for this morning, didn't I?"

Agate said that fifteen was right. "You know, I only swing about once a year now. If something doesn't look extra good, I don't touch it."

"This wasn't a caper, Lee. The fifteen is a flat loss to me."

"If you say so," Agate shrugged. "Either way, you had me stretched too far for comfort. If anyone else had phoned me to snatch up a hundred and twenty-five thousand on less than a hour's notice, I'd have told 'em to go jump."

"It was an emergency, Lee."

"I know. So," Agate smiled with a trace of nervousness. "With the eighty-five I get together, and the fifteen you give me now..."

"Mmm, yes," Mitch nodded, "that will make it, won't it? How soon can you get your end together?"

"That isn't the question, Mitch. Not right at the moment, it isn't."

"Oh?"

"No." Agate's eyes gleamed coldly behind the rimless glasses. "And if you were about to ask me if I'm worried about getting the fifteen thousand, I'll say no again. I don't have to worry. I know too much about you."

The change that had come over him was amazing. A change so pronounced that the cozy quiet of the restaurant seemed suddenly ominous. He drummed on the table, waiting, watching, his lips tightening into a thin, colorless line. He watched and waited, no longer the amiable, almost priggish acquaintance, but now revealed as the calculating whore he essentially was.

Mitch smiled at him winsomely. "Give me a few days, will you, Lee? I'm a little short this trip."

"That wasn't the agreement, Mitch."

"I honestly can't help it, Lee. My God, you know I'm good for it!"

"A man like you," said Agate, "is good only as long as he keeps his promises."

Mitch would have said the same thing himself, generally speaking. But he hadn't thought that Agate would play it so tough. "All right, Lee," he said, "I should have told you it would be a few days. Only a couple, actually. But you don't mind, do you, as long as you know you're going to get it?"

"Do I have a choice?"

The banker wadded his napkin, laid it on the table and stood up. Mitch also arose, picking up the check, but Agate plucked it from his fingers.

"Sometime when you're not so hard up, Mitch. Say two days from now."

"Aah, Lee..." Mitch winced. "I wish you wouldn't take it like this."

"Fifteen thousand. You'd better have it, Mitch."

He turned and walked away, fitting a Homburg over his pinkish scalp. Mitch looked after him, glumly, knowing that he would have to have the fifteen on the line. Knowing that he had lost his one chance to pick up the Zearsdale option.
Many Texas fortunes are old to the point of antiquity, their origins dating back to the conquistadores and huge Spanish land-grants. The founders were cattle-raisers—beef cattle; so also were their descendants, even to the present day. The discovery of oil was looked upon as a by no means lucky accident. It was "stinky stuff," something that spoiled water for the cattle and "messed up" the grazing. Since it was there, it had to be accepted, along with the millions it represented. But their attitude toward it was one of polite disdain. It was "upstart," you know. An infringement upon the civilization of a highly select group, whose forefathers had been living in elegance for centuries.

One has never been properly snubbed until he has come up against these "quality" Texans. Or perhaps snubbed is the wrong word, since one cannot very well be snubbed by a person who does not recognize his existence. Nor can one hardly take offense when that same person may be honestly puzzled at the mention of the Cabots and Lodges. Who are they, anyway? Easterners?

Oh.

That is one kind of big-money Texan, the "old" money rooted inexorably in cattle. And generally speaking, he tries to live up to the superiority with which he has cloaked himself. His conduct is impeccable. He is a loyal friend, a generous enemy. He shuns ostentation. He is gallant with ladies, a gentleman with men. As good a man in private as he is in public.

All of which is by way of saying that Winfield Lord, Jr., was not that kind of Texan. Nor did he belong to the oil-money group. In fact, the Lords fitted into none of the established categories, although they were a qualified amalgamation of several.

They were an old family. (The first had been white-trash scum from English prisons.) They were pioneers. (They had been sneak-thieving camp followers when the Five Civilized Tribes were herded up the Trail of Tears.) Their wealth had originated in cattle. (Acquired through murder.)

Arriving in what is now Oklahoma, the Lords were successively banished or chased from each of the Tribes' five autonomous Nations. Until, in about 1845, they arrived in the land of the Osages. The Osages were not a Nation, since they were not considered civilized. The government of the United States saw to it that they stayed within their own boundaries, but otherwise they were pretty much free to do as they pleased.

It shortly pleased them to spread-eagle four of the Lords on their backs, prop open their mouths with sticks and pour water down them until they were drowned.

The experience apparently had a wholesome effect on the remaining members of the clan. Fleeing into West Texas, they seem to have committed no outrages for almost a generation. Then, the Civil War broke out, and the Lords reverted to type.

While every able-bodied neighbor galloped away to support the cause of the Stars and Bars, the Lords moved in on their virtually defenseless holdings, inevitably finding other renegades to help them, then killing them off as soon as their work was done. At the war's end, they controlled whole counties. There was no law to appeal to. "They" were the law.

Gradually, success and its whilom companion, excess, had done what nothing else could do. One by one, the Lords had indulged themselves into early deaths, the exceptions being those who had rubbed the right people the wrong way.

Now, Winfield Lord, tall, dark, handsome, and a first-class son-of-a-bitch, was the last of the male line. It was, Mitch believed, the one good thing that could be said about him.

He and Lord were in the smaller of the penthouse's two bedrooms. The spread had been pulled back, and the blankets drawn tight on the bed. On the back of it, out of the way of the dice which Lord was about to roll, was a total of two thousand dollars.

He hurled the dice. They bounced against the wall, and came down on the blanket with a craps three. Immediately, he snatched them up, glaring defiantly at Mitch.

"No dice! They slipped out of my hand!"
"Oh, for Christ's sake, Winnie!" It was so ridiculous that Mitch laughed. "Are you really that bad off?"

"I told you they slipped, goddammit! It was no dice!"

"Go ahead," Mitch said wearily. "Have yourself a free roll."

Lord shook the dice vigorously. He breathed on them and kissed them and threw them. Again the dice showed one-two for craps. Mitch picked up the money, and nodded to the cattle heir.

This was it, he knew. Lord was broke again, and Turkelson would cash no more checks for him. All that remained now was to bust him out of the apartment—Red's end, of course— but pretenses had to be kept up.

"Still your dice, Winnie. You haven't had a point yet."

Lord recovered the dice, declaring that he was shooting five thousand dollars. Mitch told him to go right ahead, as soon as he showed the money.

"And don't pull that check routine on me again. I'm not having any."

"Whassa matter?" Lord belched, spewing the sour aroma of whiskey from his finely chiseled mouth. "You saying my check's no good or somethin'?"

"Skip it. I told you we play for cash or not at all. So if you don't have any more."

Lord cursed and snatched up the phone. He got Turkelson on the line, and told him to drag his fat ass up there with five thousand dollars. Met with refusal, he unleashed an obscene tirade upon the manager, ending it with a threat to come down and kick his balls off.

"A fine frigging joint!" He slammed up the phone. "Might as well stay in a goddamned shithouse!"

"Well, there's always another night," Mitch said carelessly. "Let me fix you a drink, Win."

He turned toward the living room. Lord pushed past him, declaring that he'd fix his own drinks and he didn't need any half-assed help to do it.

"'M'n expert, know what I mean?" He grabbed a bottle of Scotch from the bar and began pouring into a beer mug. "Been fixin' drinks since I was tit-high to a tumblebug. First you gotta—"

The sound of the door-chimes interrupted him. Mitch crossed the room and opened the door, and Red walked in. She was wearing a black strapless evening gown, so form-fitting that it seemed to be painted on her. Lord's glass dropped to the floor with a gurgling crash, and Red gave him a dazzling smile, then looked accusingly at Mitch.

"Why, Mitch! You're not even ready yet!"

"Oh, my God!" Mitch groaned. "Don't tell me "this" was the night!"

"It most certainly was. And you were supposed to have Harvey here, too. Alice is down in the car waiting for him."

Mitch apologized. He introduced her to Lord as Helen Harcourt and explained the seeming mixup. "A friend of mine and I had a date with Helen and her sister tonight. But it completely slipped my mind."

"And aren't you ashamed?" Red pouted. "I'll bet Mr. Lord wouldn't have forgotten, would you, Mr. Lord?"

"You just bet your sweet little ass—ankles, I wouldn't!" Lord declared gallantly. "Your sister anything like you, baby?"

"Oh, no," Red simpered. "Alice is the "pretty" member of the family."

Lord was completely carried away by the reply. "Couldn't be any prettier than you are, tutz! You're the prettiest little package of tail I've ever seen in my life!"

"Now you're just being polite." Red gave him an icy smile. "You're just saying that to be gentlemanly."

"I mean it!" Lord insisted. "The prettiest tail I ever saw in my life! And I'm a guy that's seen plenty of tail!"

Mitch decided that was about enough. More than enough. Regardless of the need to get Lord out of here, he wasn't going to have Red put up with this.

"Maybe you'd better run along now," he told her. "We'll have that date some other night."

"Well .." Her eyes told him it was all right. "I was just thinking that Mr. Lord might like to come along. To keep Alice company."

"Oh, he probably wouldn't want to bother. After all, it's getting late, and we were having a little game—"

Lord said to screw the game and how goddamned late it was, then bowed wobblingly in Red's direction. "Have to
"Excuse the language, honey. Be perfectly all right as soon as I have a drink."

"I understand," Red murmured. "I hope you don't mind putting on a dinner jacket."

"Don't mind a bit, baby. What kind you like—plaid, white, black—?"

"Black will be fine. Alice and I will be waiting down in the car, Mitch."

She swept out of the room, with another brilliant smile at Lord. He promptly returned to the bar, took a long drink direct from the bottle, and slammed it down with a shuddery hiccup. Then, turning slowly, he treated Mitch to a long, thoughtful and seemingly sober stare.

"Seen you somewhere before, haven't I?" he said.

"Have you?" Mitch said.

"Seen that redheaded broad, too. Seen the two of you together."

"We've been together before," Mitch nodded. "Now that I think of it, I believe I've seen you somewhere, too."

"So who cares? Everybody's seen me. Known far and wide."

"I'm sure you're right. Hadn't you better be getting dressed if we're going to meet the girls?"

"Don't be so goddamned rude," Lord scowled. "Can'tcha see I'm havin' a drink?"

"You can take the bottle along with you if you like."

"Now you're tryin' to patronize me," Lord declared. "Actin' like I don't have any whiskey of my own."

Mitch sighed, wondering vaguely if there wasn't an easier way to make a living. Lord would have to be carried to his suite if he didn't leave very soon. His appearance to the contrary, he must be very near the point of collapse. And yet, well, he just might not be. With Winfield Lord, Jr., one could never be sure.

His behavior was always erratic. His speech was invariably obscene. He had been sodden with alcohol for so long that drunkenness was the norm for him. Now, he was apt to be sober when he appeared to be drunkest.

"Tell you where I saw you," he was saying. "In a cage at the zoo. You were trying to slip it to another ape."

"Imagine that," Mitch yawned. "I didn't know anyone was watching."

"Just testing," Lord said wisely. "Always test people like that. Keeps 'em worried, know what I mean? Think I remember 'em they don't try to pull anything."

"That's very shrewd of you," Mitch nodded. "Then you haven't seen me before tonight?"

Lord said hell no, he hadn't, and that was one thing he had to be grateful for, "But I got to keep testing, see? I run into someone like you or that redheaded broad, I test 'em. And you know why I do it?"

"To keep them worried?"

"Well, shut up and I'll tell you, then!" Lord said. "Here's my ass, see?" He slapped his rump. "And here's the whole goddamned world"—he held up the stiffened forefinger of his right hand. "That's the world, just waitin' the chance to jab poor ol' Winnie Lord in the t-tail..."

His voice broke, and he sobbed. Then, getting control of himself, he glowered ferociously at his upheld finger.

"So what do I do about it? What does Winnie Lord do when the whole world's a big screwin' finger? Huh? Hah? Well, I'll tell you what! "He bites the goddamned thing off!"

Mitch grabbed him. Frantically, he tried to force Lord's mouth open, to pull the finger out of his mouth. But Lord was slippery and strong. They struggled about the room, stumbling over furniture, almost going through a window. At last Lord opened his mouth, and burst into jeering laughter.

"Jesus Christ!" he said. "Are you ever a jerk!"

The finger had been doubled over. There wasn't a mark on it. Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, Mitch was almost grateful to him.

That took care of any twinge of conscience he had felt at beating Lord for thirty-three thousand dollars. His feeling now was that he had earned the money, and then some.

The feeling increased as Lord suddenly remembered "Helen and Alice." Mitch suggested that he go to his own suite, so that they could be dressing simultaneously. But Lord wouldn't have it that way. No, sir! No, by God! Mitch should get dressed, and then accompany him, while he was dressing.

"Gonna keep an eye on you, get me? Y'aren't gettin' away from me for a mother-lovin' minute!"
"Suit yourself," Mitch shrugged. "You can have another drink while I'm changing."

"Stop ordering me around," Lord said. "Who the hell you think you are, anyway?"

At last they were on their way, Lord holding himself very erect, looking like a matinee idol as they descended in the elevator. Mitch guided him to his own suite, sat him down inside, and wheeled the portable bar close to him. He sat down across from him, and Lord resumed his drinking and his endless and pointless obscenities. And Mitch could not feel sorry for him—how could you feel sorry for someone who had everything and flatly refused to do anything with it? But still he was subtly perturbed; naggingly puzzled by the riddle, this particularization of the universal, which Lord represented.

You could say he was a bastard by choice. And that was true. You could say that he could hardly be anything else, in view of his heritage. And that was true. But still there had to be more to it than that; some hideous note that only he could hear in the "Leitmotif" to which he marched through life.

"Why" did he choose to be as he was? "Why" had his ancestors chosen to be as they were? "Why" did a person—a people—who were fortunate beyond their wildest dreams use their all to crap up the only world they had to live in?

Where was the answer? Did it exist in them, or in oneself? Once, finding himself on the campus of a large university, Mitch had chosen to stroll through the main engineering building. A building whose main corridor was a hundred yards long. At its beginning, the beginning of the corridor, that is, the mathematical equivalent of "pi" was engraved upon the wall—3.14159. But that, the accepted workaday definition, was not true "pi", of course. So there had been more decimals behind the customarily final one; on and on and still on, until the end of the corridor was reached. But that still was not the end of "pi", as was indicated by the plus sign behind the final decimal.

Somewhere, possibly, within the limitless infinity of mathematics, a period could be correctly put to the equation. Or, possibly, it could never be. Perhaps what was missing was not intrinsic to the formula itself, but in the eye that beheld it. Some new dimension which would illuminate the darkest corners of human knowledge, including the perverse minds of men like Winnie Lord.

However it was, Mitch decided, as he waited wearily for Lord to pass out, the answer to such imponderables as true "pi" and man's meanness was not his to provide.

However it was, he decided, he was damned glad that he was Mitch Corley, with all of Mitch Corley's problems, instead of Winfield Lord, Jr.

Lord at last drew a blank. Mitch felt his pulse, making sure that he was suffering from nothing worse than he ever suffered from. Then, having checked the apartment for any burning cigarettes, he covered Lord with a blanket and returned to the penthouse.
Turkelson and Red were seated cozily on the lounge, sipping tall drinks and nibbling from a huge tray of hot hors d'oeuvres. Mitch saw that Red was just a little bit high, and he looked at them with mock severity.

"Curse this bitter day!" he said, flinging a hand to his forehead. "So this is what goes on while I'm out sweating over a hot pair of dice!"

"It's all Turk's fault," Red declared. "He's simply been pouring the drinks down me, Mitch!"

"Mmm-hmm. And I suppose he put you in that negligee and robe, too, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did," Red said. "That's exactly what he did. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come in." Turkelson chuckled and shortled, his belly quivering with delight. Mitch sat down, counted off three thousand, three hundred dollars, and handed it to him.

"Ten per cent of thirty-three. Okay, Turk?"

"My God, yes!" the manager breathed. "It's really too much, Mitch. I didn't do anything to deserve a cut like this."

"You did plenty. How did the paper look, anyway? No illegible signatures or funny stuff?"

"See for yourself," Turkelson said, and he handed Mitch the checks which Lord had written that night. They were all made out to the hotel company, rather than to cash or an individual. Thus, they became a legitimate obligation for value received. It would be obvious, of course, that Lord's bill could not have amounted to so much. But that changed nothing. As a means of building good will, a large hotel may cash checks for a person who is not even a patron.

Mitch handed the checks back, began to relax for the first time in days. He could pay off Agate now, and still have more than enough left to take care of his other immediate needs. After that...

Well, after that was after that. For the present he was sitting sweet.

Red brought him a drink and a few delicacies from the tray. He frowned slightly as she fixed herself another drink, then grinned and winked at her. She had been a little awkward with him since she had forced him to take her to the bank. It was good to see her loosened up and having fun again.

Red would never be a drunk. She enjoyed life too much. She was too honest with herself, too clear of conscience.

"All worn out, honey?" She looked at him archly over the rim of her glass. "'Completely' worn out?"

Mitch laughed and shook his head. "How about you? Winnie was giving you a pretty hard time."

"Him? Oh, pooh! You know, he's such a complete stinker that I almost felt sorry for him."

"Don't!" Mitch said firmly. "The last woman who felt sorry for Winnie Lord almost got her nose bitten off. I'm not kidding"—he glanced at Turkelson. "You remember it, don't you, Turk? Some poor damned waitress in a Galveston beer joint."

"I remember," the manager nodded. "The Lords fought the case all the way to the Supreme Court. She didn't even get her doctor bills out of it."

Red said that that might be all well and good, but Lord had really paid her quite a compliment. "You heard him yourself, Mitch. He said I was the prettiest little package of you-know he'd ever seen."

"He was probably exaggerating," Mitch told her. "You know how these Texans are."

"Well, what about you? Do you think I am or not?"

"How would I know?" Mitch spread his hands helplessly. "You're the only woman I've ever known."

"Mmm," Red said. "Mmmm-mmm-mmm! Am I going to kiss you for that when I get you alone!" Then she turned and gave Turkelson a speculative look. "Now, I just wonder," she said. "I wonder if you'd know."

"What about?" Turkelson grinned expectantly. "Why not ask me?"

"Well, okay, but you've got to promise to tell the truth." She cocked her head to one side. "You promise, you big fat man?"

"Promise." He held up a hand, chuckling.

Red turned on the lounge on her knees and whispered in his ear. The ear suddenly turned sunset red, as did his
"Well?" she demanded pertly. "What do you think?"

"Uh, I, uh, think I'd better go," Turkelson said desperately, running a plump finger around his collar. "I—I—"

He struggled to his feet. Red grabbed him by the coattail and dragged him down again.

"Now, you've got to tell the truth," she insisted. "If you don't tell the truth, you'll have to pay the penalty. You know what the penalty is?"

She whispered to him again, leaned back with a solemn nod. Turkelson appeared to be on the point of strangling.

"That's it," she declared. "If you don't tell the truth right this minute, I'm going to make you—"Mitch!" Mitch, you let me go, darn you!"

Mitch held her sackwise, tucked under one arm. As she kicked and squealed, he shook hands with Turkelson.

"Good going, my friend. We'll see you tomorrow, huh?"

"Uh, yes. You bet, Mitch." The manager edged nervously toward the door.

"And we've checked out as far as Lord is concerned, understand? No telephone calls. He doesn't get up here on the elevator."

"Right! Oh, absolutely!" Turkelson bobbed his head. "I— I'll let myself out, Mitch!"

He did so, just as Red tugged herself free, pirouetted, and paused with an arm theatrically upflung. "A little music, Professor."

"Now, honey. It's getting pretty late..."

"Hush!" she said. "Music!"

"Well, okay then. Just a little."

He had never had music lessons. But he had an excellent memory and, naturally, a sensitive touch. Sitting down at the Piano, he pressed the soft pedal, considered the keyboard for a moment and brought his hands down on it. Very softly, he swung out with a swaggering barrel-house version of "It Must Be Jelly, 'Cause Jam Don't Shake Like That."

Red did a low-down grind, turning completely around. She kicked backwards, and one of her houseslippers sailed into the air. Turning and grinding, she kicked again and the other slipper sailed free.

Mitch moved both hands down to the bass. The piano became a tom-tom, and Red's face took on an ecstatic look. Head flung back, leaning backward from her knees, she writhed out of her robe.

The lacy negligee went next. And that was all for a minute or two.

Mitch moved up the keyboard, his fingers insistent, demanding. Red's hands went to her bra, seeming to struggle with themselves, to fight against the action. Then, as the piano sobbed and pleaded, she suddenly ripped it off.

The panties went next. Then...

Then there was nothing more. Only Red.

Ripe, full-bodied, a living dream of pulsing pastel.

They looked at each other silently. Then, she turned slightly, pointing to an almost invisible bruise on her flank.

"See?" she said. "That's what you did when you spanked my bottom."

"Into each life," Mitch said, "some rain must fall."

"Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

"Well, I might," Mitch said, "if I was sure you weren't one of those phony redheads."

Red said he could surely see for himself that she wasn't, but Mitch said it was not something that could be determined with the naked eye.

"Why, I knew a blonde one time who passed herself off as a brunette. Her boy friend was a coal miner, you see, and he was allergic to soap and water."

Red made her eyes very large. "My goodness gracious," she said. "Not to mention heavens-to-Betsy. So there's no way of knowing whether I'm a phony or not?"

"Well, yes there is," Mitch said. "It's a method I've developed over the years, and I've enjoyed every minute of it. How are you fixed for time?"
"Well, I don't have anything on tonight..."

"So you don't," Mitch said. "But I'm afraid tonight wouldn't be nearly enough. How about the next forty or fifty years?"

Red said oh, sure, she could manage that all right. What were forty or fifty years when the interests of science were at stake?

Mitch stood up and pointed firmly to the bedroom. "Just step into my laboratory, madam. The tests will begin immediately, and I don't mean perhaps."
Winfield Lord's reservation at the hotel had been for three days, including the day of his arrival. But perversely and for no apparent reason he remained for six. He made no attempt to reach Mitch. Quite possibly, with his long training in blanking-out, he did not remember being with Mitch. But that was only a possibility, not a certainty. It was also possible, where anyone as tricky as he was concerned, that he was merely biding his time, waiting for the proper moment to Spring one of the near-riots for which he was famous, or rather, infamous. Some brannigan that would attract the attention of the police and newspapers.

Mitch couldn't risk that, naturally. Neither could he risk the demand from Lord for another game. Even the thirty-three thousand was an uncomfortably large amount to take from such a character. Turkelson would have his neck out to there if he continued to play cashier for Mitch. You could always get bit by riding a good thing too far.

Lord kept pretty much to his suite, consuming great quantities of liquor, eating sparsely, receiving occasional visits from call girls and the house physician (in that order). Of necessity, then, Mitch and Red remained in their suite. Lord would forget them in time, if he hadn't already. For the present, they could not take the chance of encountering him.

This cooling out on a chump, of course, is routine in any hustle. Ordinarily, it would have been accomplished by jumping town. Since that was impractical here, they could only remain in hiding. Which, Mitch reflected, wouldn't have been at all hard to take normally. What was so tough about being holed up in a fancy penthouse with a beautiful doll and a big bundle of the green? Red thought it was just fine and dandy—and proved it by hardly letting him out of her sight. Mitch—well, Mitch would have thought it was fine too, if he could ever have stopped thinking for a moment about Agate.

He had already broken one promise to the banker. Now, since more than two days had gone by, he had broken another. And Agate knew things about him, things which could be very dangerous if he chose to reveal them.

Mitch doubted that Agate would be appeased by anything less than cash. But on the third afternoon, while Red was showering, he managed a quick call to him.

"All right," the banker snapped, as Mitch began a hasty explanation. "You couldn't get in. When can you?"
"Well, I'm not sure, Lee. I hope I can make it tomorrow, but—"
"Forget tomorrow, then. What about the next day?"
"Well, I—I—"
"Or the day after that?"
"Well—Lee, I just can't say for sure. But—"
"I know. You've got something big on the fire, and you want to keep me quiet until you can pull it off."
"Aah, no, Lee! It isn't like that at all. I—"

Agate slammed up the phone. Mitch didn't bother to call him back. Nor would it have done any good if he had. There was nothing to do but wait and worry.

The end of Lord's stay coincided with the weekend. Thus, it was Monday before Mitch could notify Agate that the fifteen thousand was waiting for him.

"But—but I thought that—"
"Well, now you know you were wrong," Mitch said. "Same place, same time, okay? We'll have lunch."
"Well, uh, I'm not sure that—uh—"
"You can have a drink with me if you're tied up for lunch. Or I can drop the dough off at the bank for you."
"No. No, don't do that," Agate said, and he seemed to sigh. "We'll make it for drinks."

They met at the same quietly luxurious restaurant they had lunched in the previous week. Mitch handed him an envelope, and he looked at it almost blankly for a moment. Then, he opened the flap, thumbed through the contents, and slowly raised his eyes again.

"Well?" Mitch said. "It's all there, isn't it?"
"What?" Agate blinked. "Oh, yes. Yes, it's all here." He tapped thoughtfully on the table with the envelope. Then, his lips tightening peevishly, he added that Mitch was very late. "Inexcusably late. You couldn't blame me at all if
I'd blown the whistle on you."

"Well, as long as you didn't," Mitch shrugged.

"You just can't do things like this, Mitch." Agate shook his head fretfully. "You of all people should know that you Can't. You break one promise to me. Then, you come right back and break another one. You just let everything slide, and then you show up when you're damned good and ready and expect everything to be all right."

"Isn't it, Lee?" Mitch said. "Isn't it all right? If it isn't you'd better tell me right now."

But Agate continued his nagging. He had to. It was a mask for the confusion, the uncertainty, the fear which teemed through his mind. It was a rationalization—an attempt to blame Mitch for his own betrayal. And how could he possibly tell the truth, anyway? He needed this fifteen thousand. He was terrified of what Mitch might do if he knew the truth.

"Well, Lee," Mitch was saying. "Isn't it all right? Does this square us up, or doesn't it?"

"Now, that's not the point," Agate said doggedly. "You've got to admit that—"

"Never mind." Mitch gestured curtly. "I can't sit here all day while you scold me. How much more do you want — two-fifty, five? I thought the fifteen was damned plenty, but I'll sweeten it if you say so."

"Now, I said nothing about sweetening it," Agate muttered. "I didn't say a thing about wanting more money."

"But you do want it, don't you?" Mitch studied him carefully. "If you don't, what the hell is this all about?"

He took a sip of his vermouth cassis, keeping his eyes on the banker. Agate gulped down the last of his double Scotch, sat twirling the glass nervously. "God, why couldn't he have waited? Why had he had to be in such a hell of a hurry? Why—how—"

Suddenly, he saw a way out, or thought he saw one. It was a stupid way, actually no way at all. But desperation and the abrupt infusion of whiskey made it seem brilliant. Smiling, he tucked the money envelope into his pocket, and held out a hand.

"The fifteen is plenty," he said, "and excuse me if I've given you a hard time. I had a rough morning at the bank."

Mitch hesitated, studying him a moment longer. But the explanation sounded reasonable, and he could think of no other. Blue Monday—a hard morning after a hard weekend. It figured, didn't it?

"It happens to the best of us," he said. "Then we're all set? Still friends?"

"Of course we are. Certainly we are, Mitch. Just give me a holler the next time you need help. I'm afraid I can't do anything for you in that Zearsdale matter, but anything else..."

Mitch nodded, not particularly disappointed. The Zearsdale option had been a longshot, something he had had to try for without really expecting to hit. It was enough that he had been able to square himself with the banker, and he was very relieved to have done it.

A dress-suited waiter approached, looked expectantly from one to the other of them. Mitch suggested lunch, but Agate shook his head.

"I think I'll just settle for another drink, another double, please," he said. "And don't let me keep you, Mitch. I've got some things to think out, and I'd just as soon be alone for a while."

Mitch took the hint and excused himself. As he departed, the waiter brought Agate's second drink, and the banker took a grateful gulp from the brimming glass. With a sigh, he settled back in the upholstered booth. For the moment, at least, he could almost see himself as the suave man of large affairs, the shrewd and imposing executive, which only drink or dreams had ever permitted him to be.

His wife and children had no use for him. His employers and co-executives gave him neither liking nor respect. Fortuitously, he had been available at a time when death and war had vacated increasingly desirable positions, and thinned the ranks of those aspiring to them. He had been there—when no one else was there—so now he was here. And no one knew better than he that he had no right to be here, the assistant vice-president of a large bank. Mere chance was responsible; chance and a lack of imagination were responsible, a mental laziness which had kept him in the same rut it had led him to—a normally dead-end rut—for more than thirty years.

He had come straight from high school to the bank. Now nearing fifty, he was increasingly conscious of his inadequacies and decreasingly able to repair or conceal them. Time had shrunk him even as it had expanded the responsibilities of his job. The noise of his rattling around in it was drawing frequent and frightening looks from his superiors.
It would be extremely awkward, of course, almost impractical, to dispose of a thirty-year man who was an upper echelon executive. And Agate's appearance was a constant contradiction of the errors which could only occasionally be traced to him. How could one believe that there was virtual emptiness behind the impressive, banker-like exterior with which he daily faced the world? With so much on display, then, logically, there had to be a great deal more underneath; as with an iceberg, whose greatest mass is below the surface.

Logic and had-to-be's to the contrary, however, there was daily evidence that his employers were at last seeing him for what he was. As literally nothing compared to what he should have been. As a very vulnerable link in a chain which needed to be strong. Now, if somewhat belatedly, they were discovering the real man... a discovery which the first of a long series of hustlers had made almost fifteen years before.

Those were the facts on Lee Jackson Agate.

In the bemusing glow of alcohol he ignored them, becoming one of the highest and mightiest among the high and the mighty. He argued pleasantly with a readily acquiescent self, pointing out that he "was" a success, wasn't he? However it had come about, he "was" a success.

He had a fine home, two fine cars, a comfortable quantity of stocks and bonds. He was quite a little in debt, having unwisely followed the same market advice he had given various customers of the bank. But why niggle over trifles? What was debt to a man with such an impeccable credit rating that he had been able to acquire liabilities which were more than double his assets?

His house was in his wife's name, "darn her", as were his blue chip stocks. But the nagging and henpecking which had brought about this arrangement could not change Texas law. In effect, a married woman in Texas could not own property, her assets being under the legal control of her husband. He could do just about as he pleased with what she had hoped to do as she pleased—"darn her!"—so he would just go into this Zearsdale stock-option deal, and he would split a fast one hundred and fifty thousand with Mitch. And then afterwards, when his wife saw how truly brilliant he was.

Well, things had been quite good with them at one time. Back in the beginning they had been good. Then, his parents had come to live with them, having no other way of living, and the good had rapidly become bad. His wife had resented them. She had resented him for being too namby-pamby to let them starve. They were well-meaning—but they were also woefully ignorant, and in their anxiety to be amiable, good comp'ny, they provided their daughter-in-law with the means of wreaking vengeance on Agate for the rest of his life.

"Pa"—his mother would say. "Do you remember the time when you sneaked up on Lee when he was out in the privy, an'..."

Or, "Ma"—his father would say. "You remember the time when Lee got sent home from school f'r havin' lice in his pants? 'Pears like someone told him if he set on a hen's nest long enough he could lay aigs, an'..."

Or, "Yessir, that Lee was really a case. Fell t'sleep in church with his mouth open, an' a big ol' Juney-bug flew down his throat. Had to knock him out with a prayer book before we could get him calmed down..."

That was the way it went. That was the way, with Lee Agate trying to smile, unable to chide his own parents; his wife listening, eyes sparkling maliciously. And later, when passion or tenderness mounted in him, when his being cried out for the understanding he had so freely given himself, then, then a chilling snigger, a gesture of simulated disgust, a suggestion that he go on out to the privy, the repeated implication that he was stupid or perverted or clumsy or nasty or vicious, any and all of the unpleasant things which the senile anecdotes of his parents had painted him as being.

Naturally, his wife's attitude carried over to his children. He had never been able to correct them or even to suggest a course of conduct to them without arousing their derision. It had been a very long time since he had tried to, just as it had been a very long time since he had made any gesture of love to his wife; anything more than the merest peck on the cheek. She resented this, of course, and his children resented his abandonment of his proper role in the family. Perhaps, in the final analysis, he was at fault rather than they.

It is an unquestioned tradition in the lore of the American family that the adult male would go the way of the buffalo except for the protection and guidance of his wife and children. He may be trusted to perform brain surgery, but never to sharpen a pencil. He may be a chef, but in his own home he cannot boil water. He may be a writer, but his help on a freshman theme is a virtual guarantee of a failing grade.

Possibly there is an inverse relationship between the low rating of the American male in his own home and the alarming increase in impotence, insanity, alcoholism, homosexuality, suicides, divorces, abortions, murders, censorship and educated illiterates. Still, the male is holding out rather well against the loved ones who want only to
tear him apart and gobble him up. He makes his office his home, his work his pride. Undistracted, he proves his worthwhileness over and over, eventually garnering so much moral muscle that even his kiddies are impressed and refrain from cursing him in front of strangers, and his little woman gives him a little of what little women have to give without first making him confess that he is a walleyed son-of-a-bitch and that she is the nicest, sweetest, darlingest, generousest, beautifulest, unselfishest, perfectest, ad infinitum, ad nauseum something-or-another that ever dwelt south of heaven.

Unfortunately for Lee Agate (and his family) he had no job. Not in the true sense of the word. A creature who looks like a duck, makes noises like a duck and is generally ducklike in its behavior, may safely be presumed to be a duck. But Agate, who bore all the outward aspects of a bank executive, was no more than an implausible facsimile of one. He found fear and not satisfaction in his position. His crisp mannerisms, his sternness, were only an aggressive cover-up for that fear, a growing conviction of inferiority which the job nurtured in him.

So...

So he'd just take the afternoon off, goddamn 'em! That'd show 'em, right? "Right?"

Right!


Agate suddenly sat erect and made his face stern. He looked around the now sparsely-occupied room, lips thinned severely, eyes flashing sharply behind his glasses. But no one had been watching him apparently... unless perhaps they had looked away very quickly. Or if they had, it was certainly understandable. Ob'sly big man. Capt'n of Commerce. 'D' realize big man had to relax a little, an' get away from his cares.

The waiter brought him a fourth drink, set it down in front of him with a very deliberate gesture. Agate stared at him coldly, and the waiter asked him if he would like to see a menu.

Agate said that he wouldn't. What he wanted was a telephone, and he wanted one now. "Right now, understand. Let's see a little service around here!"

His eyes glittered triumphantly as the waiter scampered away. He took two long gulps of his drink. He waited in aloof silence while a phone was plugged in at the booth.

In his many years with the bank, he had had frequent contacts with prominent and powerful Houstonites, Zearsdale among them. He was invariably in the role of a glorified messenger boy on these occasions, but he did not remember them that way now. Rather, in the roseate present, he saw himself moving among these people as a friend rather than a flunky. They were his pals and he was their pal, and naturally Jake Zearsdale would want to give his pal Lee Agate an option to buy stock at two-fifths of its market value.

Perf'ly understan'ble, right? "Right?" Ri—

Nope, wasn't right. Not now, maybe later. But Jake Zearsdale had to be called, all ri', al ri-ut! Had to be called about ol' pal Mitch Corley.

Agate straightened himself again. The importance of what he was about to do impressed itself on his sodden brain, demanding all the effort of which he was capable. And getting an outside line, he dialed and spoke into the phone very carefully.

A secretary answered him, passed him on to an executive secretary, and thence, to an executive secretary of an executive assistant. Finally, almost ten minutes after he had placed the call, he was connected with Zearsdale.

He was beginning to fog-up again by then, and he virtually guffawed into the phone. He choked it off, mumbled a blurry, "'Scuse me, Mr. Zearsdale."

The line was silent for a moment. Then, his voice harshly musical, Zearsdale said, "Certainly. Who is this please?"

"Dis is dub guy dat called you las' week," Agate said. "About Mitch Corley, r'member. Called you last week 'bout Mitch—hic—Corley, I'm duh—"

"Would you mind speaking a little louder, please?" Zearsdale said. "We seem to have a bad connection."

"Cert'nly"—Agate raised his voice. "Said I was dub guy dat called you las' week about "Mish—Mitch"—"

"Louder, please. And just a little slower."

"I said," said Agate, enunciating as clearly as he could, "that I was the guy who called you last week about Mitch Corley. 'Juh get me that time?"
"Mmm, yes, I believe I did," Zearsdale murmured. "Do you have some more information on him?"

Agate shook his head firmly. Then laughed in selfdeprecation as he realized that the negative could not be seen. "Little joke on me," he explained to the phone, and explained the jest in detail. Zearsdale laughed politely.

"I'm a little crowded for time," he added. "Perhaps you'd better tell me why you are calling."

"Wha'? Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure," Agate mumbled. "Jus' Wanted to say I was all wrong 'bout Mitch. Checked into it m'self an' found I'd made a terrible mistake. Hesitated— "hic"—'bout callin' yuh, but figgered man makes mistake Oughta be big 'nough to admit it."

"I see," Zearsdale said thoughtfully. "I see."

"Mean it," Agate insisted. "'S'all wrong. Based on unr'li ble information. Checked it out m'self an'—"

"Possibly. Just possibly," Zearsdale's tone was judicious. "But I'm inclined to think that you're not telling the truth. I'm quite a student of voices and you don't sound at all sincere."

"Oh, yeah?" Agate glared belligerently into the mouthpiece. "Now, you lissen t'me, buddy—"

"Shut up," Zearsdale said.

"Huh? What'd'ya mean shut—"

"I mean to shut up, and you'd better do it," Zearsdale said. "You'd also better stop drinking. You can't handle it. You're a big enough damned fool when you're sober."

Agate's mouth was suddenly very dry. His lips moved in a silently futile attempt at speech.

"Now I'm going to give you some advice," Zearsdale continued. "I wouldn't take your word for anything, so I'll find out the truth about Corley myself. Meanwhile, he is not to know that you have spoken to me. You will make no attempt to warn him. If you do, I'll make you the sorriest man in Texas, and that's a promise, Mr. L. J. Agate."

The mention of his name was like a purgative to Agate. He was abruptly very sober, more frightened than he had ever been in all his fear-filled life.

"W-What," he croaked. "What are you going to do?"

"Do?" said Zearsdale, and his voice was almost lilting. "Why I'm going to invite Mr. Corley to have dinner with me."

He hung up.

Agate hung up. He looked at his drink, started to reach for it, then jerked his hand back as though it had touched a flame.

He had better go back to the bank, he guessed. No, he had better go home. No, he had better go—go—?

The waiter approached, still deferential from the last time Agate had barked at him. Agate straightened himself, patted the thin hair on his scalp, assumed an impressive frown, opened his mouth to speak, and vomited all to hell over everything.
The day had been hot and humid; a muggy, sweltering day; and one seemed on the point of boiling in his own perspiration. The kind of day that is not quite so "unusual" as the city's civic organizations would have one believe. Those organizations may admit that Houston's weather occasionally leaves something to be desired. But they hasten to point out, and with some truth, that however unpleasant the day, the nights are delightfully cool. To someone unaccustomed to the climate, the delightful coolness may bear a striking resemblance to frigidity. And as Mitch had pre-prandial drinks with Zearsdale, he was grateful for the low blaze in the fieldstone fireplace.

The fireplace was in the kitchen of the Zearsdale home. Zearsdale, in shirt sleeves and a butcher's apron, had led him back to the kitchen immediately upon his arrival, and they were now seated at a large wooden table—one of those sturdy Utility tables such as one sees in restaurant kitchens—and drinking a very authoritative ale from pewter mugs.

The oil man sighed on a subtly happy note, brushing alefoam from his mouth as he looked around the huge beamed room. "I think I'd live in here if I could move a bed in," he said. "There's something about it that makes me feel relaxed and at peace with myself."

"It's a lot of kitchen," Mitch smiled. "I know I've never seen anything like it outside of a big hotel."

"And you never will," Zearsdale said, nodding toward the range which ran practically the width of the room. "Three cooks can work at that at the same time. You could run five thousand meals off of it in a day if you had to."

"I can believe it. You do a lot of entertaining out here, I suppose?"

"Practically none." Zearsdale shook his head. "I just happen to like a big, well-equipped kitchen. I like to see it and be in it. I'm not married, and any entertaining I do is usually done at the club. But still... well, I suppose it goes back a long way. How about you, Corley? What kind of home life did you have as a boy?"

Mitch said that he hadn't had much in the accepted sense of the word. "We always lived in hotels. My father sold various kinds of intangibles, and my mother worked with him."

"They must have hit it lucky somewhere along the line."

"Pure luck, I'm afraid, Mitch said deprecatingly. "I don't know too much about it, since I was just a kid at the time. But I know they sunk a lot of money in things that never panned out."

Zearsdale poured more ale for him, remarking that their backgrounds were not dissimilar. "We ran the cookshack for drilling crews. My mother and I did, rather; my dad usually got some kind of little job flunking around the rig. A drilling rig runs twenty-four hours a day, of course, which meant that we had to serve meals around the clock. I don't think my mother and I ever got to sleep more than two hours in a row."

He shook his head, remembering, his eyes wandering over the room's extravagantly elaborate equipment. "We did all the cooking on a four-burner oil-stove, and we lived and slept in the same room we cooked in. We... well, never mind. There's nothing very interesting about drudgery."

"It's a good story," Mitch said. "I'd like to hear it."

"Well," Zearsdale shrugged. "I'll keep it short then..."

The owner of a wildcat lease on which they were working (he continued) had become deeply in debt to them. So deeply that by the time the well was drilled in—a gusher—they owned a large share of the property. Borrowing money from friends, he tried to pay them off for the actual cash amount of his debt. When they refused, he wangled a secret agreement with the pipeline company.

The company contracted to take the oil, being legally bound to. But payment was to be upon delivery; at such time, that is, as the pipeline was connected with the well. It soon became apparent that that time was not going to come as long as the Zearsdales retained their share. There was one delay after another. Delays that were an obvious ploy in a game of freeze-out. But there was no money to go into court and prove it.

"My dad was all for settling—he wasn't a very strong man, I'm afraid..." A contemptuous note crept into Zearsdale's voice. "But my mother had other ideas. He wouldn't go along with them, so she and I handled it ourselves. We had to, you know, Corley? Here a great wrong was being done, and the law couldn't touch the people who were doing it. So we "had" to. I was fourteen years old at the time, but it's a lesson I've never forgotten: That the strong people of the world have an obligation to that world. That's why they have been made strong, you understand. To crack down hard when they see someone getting out of line..."
"Mmm, yes. Very interesting," Mitch said. "But just what did you and your mother do?"

"Well..." Zearsdale chuckled. "No one could prove that we did anything, Corley. They didn't even suggest that we did. It was put down as an accident, and it really raised holy hell. You see, that was ranching country out there. Rolling grasslands with cattle grazing as far as the eye could see. When the fire broke out—and my mother and I were a long way off, naturally—"

"Fire?" Mitch stared at him. "Do you mean you—... you—"

"Fire. From the seepage around the well. It wouldn't have happened if the pipeline had been connected as it should have been, so they were held liable for the damages. Ten million dollars, plus another hundred thousand to have the fire put out. On top of that, we collected our pro rata share of the cost of every barrel of oil that had burned." Zearsdale chuckled again. Grimly. "There was no more stalling after that. No more trouble. From them or anyone else."

He had Mitch accompany him into a large walk-in refrigerator to help select their dinner steaks. He cooked and served them expertly, and fortunately Mitch was very hungry. Otherwise, he might not have been able to ignore the picture which their odor aroused in his mind: a picture of charred grasslands, littered as far as the eye could see with the smoking carcasses of cattle that had been roasted alive.

After dinner, Zearsdale washed and dried the dishes, politely but firmly declining Mitch's offer to help. "I'm an old pro at this, Corley, and I kind of like to keep my hand in. God knows I've got plenty of hired help if I didn't choose to do it."

Mitch assumed that the servants had been let off for the evening. But Zearsdale said they had never been on.

"They need time of their own as well as I do. Aside from that, most of them are getting along in years—they've been with me since my mother's time—and I wouldn't want to keep them up late."

He stripped off of his apron and dried his hands on it, shaking his head to Mitch's remark that he was very generous with his servants.

"No. No, I'm afraid I'm not, Corley. It isn't possible for a man to be generous when he has a half-billion dollars, which is my estimated net worth. He's lost his capacity to be touched by what he does, you know. He has no personal identification with it. There's neither a sacrifice in giving away a million nor a gain in making one. Now, I do try very hard to be fair, and I think I succeed most of the time. But you'll find a lot of people who would disagree. Such as," he grimaced distastefully, "our cheating friend, Birdwell."

The memory of the prematurely gray man, his easy laughter, the obvious liking of the people around him, moved Mitch uneasily. "I can't help feeling sorry for him," he said. "I almost wish I'd kept my mouth shut about his cheating."

"I feel sorry for him, too," Zearsdale said gravely. "He's thrown away a fine career. He's dragged his family down with him. But he did it, not I nor you. We can't ignore wrong, Corley, and we can't reward people for doing it."

"But he had a good record with you, didn't he? He'd been with you for a long time."

"He had a very good record," Zearsdale nodded, "and he'd been very well rewarded for it. Now, if I reward a man for being good, and believe me I do—I've given anonymous help to many people who have no connection with my company—then I must punish him for being bad. Or don't you agree with me?"

Mitch hesitated, looking into the thick-lipped face with its sharp, cold eyes—utterly sincere eyes. Looking away again.

"Well," he said, "I should think that would be a very Uncomfortable responsibility for you. Like being God, you know."

"Yes," Zearsdale agreed gravely, "that's exactly what it is. Like being God."

The intent eyes remained on Mitch for a moment, and Mitch fought down an almost irresistible impulse to laugh. He was half-inclined to believe, for that matter, that he was expected to laugh—that the oil man had been giving him a dead-pan ribbing.

"Take that bit about setting an oil well on fire. Now, that didn't ring true, did it?"

Zearsdale suddenly grinned, remarking that they didn't have to solve all the world's problems tonight, now did they? "Thought any more about that stock option?" he added. "Think you're going to be able to pick it up?"

"It doesn't look that way at the moment." Mitch shook his head regretfully. "I don't fully understand the picture, but I seem to be involved in a long-term investment program. I couldn't pull out at this point without losing
practically everything that's been put into it."

"I see. I think I know what you mean," Zearsdale said casually. "Well, do you feel up to a little fun?" He
simulated a man shooting dice. "Like to roll the bones a little?"

"Whatever you say," Mitch smiled.

He followed Zearsdale to a sunken recreation room, and the oil man got brandy for them from a long saloon-type
bar. Then, as Zearsdale excused himself ("to go after ammunition"), he wandered over to the dice table. It was a
regulation, gambling-house crap table, marked off for field, pass, come, craps and so on. In the ceiling above it, and
approximately the same dimensions, was a mirror. Mitch was idly puzzled by it—why a mirror over a crap table? He
picked up the dice from the green felt, and made a few throws with them. Zearsdale returned, slapping two thick
sheafs of bills together—new one-hundred-dollar bills with the bank's band still around them.

"Warming up on me, huh?" He laughed roguishly. "Well, we'll see about that. Want to tee-lee for firsts?" Each of
them rolled one of the dice. Mitch got a six. Zearsdale matched it.

Mitch threw a five next time, not wanting to look too good. Zearsdale came back with a six. He picked up both
dice and shook them.

"Put a name to it, Corley. A buck—two bucks?"

"A couple of bucks will be fine," Mitch said, and he dropped two hundred dollars on the table.

"Two into that," Zearsdale said, and he laid down a packet of the hundreds.

He rolled the dice. They came up craps—snake-eyes. Since he had had no point, he lost the bet but kept the dice.
"Shoot the four bucks," he said, and came out with a big seven.

Again picking up the transparent cubes, he glanced at Mitch. "Eight or any part, Corley."

"Eight," Mitch nodded, and he dropped more money on the table.

Zearsdale sixed on the next roll, and fell off a few rolls later with a seven. He chuckled, good-humoredly, tapping
the sheaf of bills.

"Sixteen into me, my friend. Want to shoot it?"

"Sure," Mitch agreed. "Shoot it all."

He was still intent on making it look good, so he rolled a point rather than passing. The point was ten, and he
came right back with a—"seven!"

He could hardly believe it for a moment. "How in the hell could it have happened?" He could think of only one
reason, and that reason was not nearly so far-fetched as it seemed.

The rich "do" get richer, the majority do, often with no apparent effort on their part. Them that has gets. The
same quality which led them to their original getting continues to prevail in their favor. Perhaps there is a better
name for that quality than luck, but no one has ever heard it.

Of course, Mitch could admit the possibility that he might have goofed; he had done it before to the tune of much
bigger losses. But always before he had sensed the slipping of his control, the momentary short-circuit between his
brain and his fingers. This time, however, he had had no such feelings.

He had called for a ten, certain of its arrival. And the devil had jumped up at him.

Still, he hadn't lost anything yet. He had been shooting with Zearsdale's money. So despite a certain uneasiness,
his gambler's conviction that skill can never beat luck, he agreed to another doubling of the bet.

"Sure," he said, piling bills onto the green felt. "Thirty-two's a nice round number."

"Here we go," Zearsdale said, and away he went.

With a six-five, a six-ace, a five-two, a four-trey, an eight, another eight, and another eleven...

And then Mitch was glancing into his wallet, grinning ruefully, as casual as though he had dropped a book of
matches instead of what was practically the last cent he had in the world.

"I guess that's going to have to be the end of our game," he said pleasantly. "Next time I'll come a little better
prepared."

"Now, you don't need cash with me," Zearsdale said. "Just write a check for whatever you like."

"No, that's not fair to you." Mitch shook his head "I think it jinxes a man to bet paper against cash."

"Well, borrow some cash from me then. Come on now," Zearsdale urged jovially. "The game's just getting
interesting."

Mitch strongly demurred, but not nearly so strongly as he had in the matter of the check. At last, at the oil man's insistence, he accepted a loan of ten thousand dollars. With it, his confidence surged back into him.

He firmly believed, as any gambler would have, that Zearsdale had given away his luck with the loan. He would now be betting against his own money, and the good fortune it had brought him.

Just as he shook the dice, there was a sudden clatter from the room above them. Mitch started, surprised at the noise in what must be a well-built house, and Zearsdale looked upward with dark disgust. He muttered something to the effect that if the help wanted to romp around all night, they could stay up and work.

"Let's see," he said. "Coming out for thirty-two hundred, right?"

"You're covered," Mitch nodded.

Zearsdale rolled. The dice bounced and spun, and laughed at him with a little three. He passed them back to Mitch, and Mitch settled down to work.

He was confident, but very careful. The goof-of-the-year was out of his system now, and the magic was back in his hands. But he was taking no chances. He could only control the dice while he had them, and he could not hold onto them indefinitely.

His first move was to lower the bet to five hundred dollars—after all, why make work out of fun? Thus buoyed against a lucky run by Zearsdale, he won thirty-five hundred dollars before deliberately crapping out.

The oil man passed, pointed and fell off.

Mitch went to work again, allowing himself only two passes, beating all around a point before he made it; finally going "unlucky" after another thirty-five-hundred-dollar run.

He kept it looking good all the way—something much harder to do than winning.

It was drudgery but it paid off. Some ninety minutes after he had landed in the swamp he was up on the mountain top. He was square on the loan and his original stake was back in his pocket, and with it was eighteen thousand of Zearsdale's money.

He lost the dice at this point. The oil man let them lay, politely stifling a yawn.

"Getting a little tired, aren't you? What do you say we have a drink?"

"Maybe I'd just better run along," Mitch said. "Unless you'd rather keep the game going. I don't want to quit winner on you if you do."

Zearsdale said, oh, what the hell? There'd be another night. "We'll be seeing each other again. You can depend on it, Corley. Now, if you're sure you won't have a drink."

He saw Mitch to the door. They shook hands and said good night, and Zearsdale gently closed the door behind him. Then, he went up the stairs, his square, heavy-set body moving as lightly as a cat's, and opened the door of a small room.

It was directly above the recreation room. Part of its flooring had been taken up, creating a gape in its approximate center. Poised to look down through this—and through the two-way mirror above the crap table—was a motion picture camera.

As Zearsdale entered the room, a thin middle-aged Negro was closing the lid on a round film can. He began an immediate apology, fear shining out of his liquid eyes.

"Mr. Zearsdale, I'm sure sorry, sir. Terribly, terribly sorry, sir. I just happened to step backwards, an' I kicked that can—"

"It could have spoiled everything," Zearsdale said mildly. "Might have tipped him off, and left me looking like a fool. Do you think I'm a fool, Albert?"

"M-Mister Zearsdale,"—the Negro paled under his yellowish skin. "Please, sir, M-Mister Zearsdale..."

"I've never let you down, have I, Albert?" Zearsdale went on, his voice harshly musical. "Treat you like a white man, don't I, instead of a jig? Treat you a lot better than a lot of white men. You live just as good as I do, and you get a thousand a month for screwing around. That's all it amounts to, you know. You aren't worth a thousand cents a month. I just give it to you so that you can send your kids to school."

The Negro's head bowed on his thin neck. He stood trembling and helpless, biting his lip. Blinking back the tears of fear and shame.
"Well, all right, then," Zearsdale said in a gentler tone. "I don't let my people down. I don't let my people let me down. Is that the film there?"

"Yessir, yessir, that's it." The Negro snatched up the can and humbly tendered it to his employer. "Think you got him, Mr. Zearsdale, sir. Can't be sure, but I thinks so."

Zearsdale said that he would make sure; he never guessed about anything. "How are your children getting along, Albert? Not quite ready to graduate, are they?"

"Jacob is, sir. Only got one more year of law school. Amanda, she still got two years lef' in teachers' college."

"Amanda," Zearsdale murmured. "My mother would have appreciated having a child named after her."

"Yessir, an' Jacob, he named after you, Mr. Zearsdale. Real proud of it, too, Mr. Zearsdale. Yessir, real proud."

"I'm glad to hear it, very glad," the oil man nodded. "I'd hate to think that anyone with my name didn't have pride. A man without pride is no good, did you know that, Albert? If he doesn't have pride he doesn't have anything, not a damned thing to build on. I don't like a man like that. I may put up with him, but I don't like him. If he won't stand up for himself, if he'd rather have a brown nose than a bruised One, I don't and can't like him. How long have you been kissing my ass, Albert?"

"M-Mister—Mister Z-Zearsdale..."

"Twenty-three years, right? Well, that's long enough. You're fired."
The bedroom shades were drawn, and the dimness of night still prevailed. Mitch rolled over in the bed, his eyes closed in sleep, his hands automatically seeking Red. It had been a very big night. A very big, very wonderful, very wild-wild night, and even in sleep the wonder and the wildness of it remained with him. He relived it, again smelling the faint perfume of her flesh, again hearing the passionate struggling of her breath, again feeling the savage sweetness of her body as it fitted itself to his.

"Red..." he mumbled, his hands probing the bedclothes. "Let's... let's... "Red?" A frown spread over his face, and the movements of his hands quickened, became desperate. "Red?... "Red!" Where are—" And then his eyes flew open and he sat up with a yell.

"RED!"

There was a clatter from the bathroom. The door banged open and Red ran out. She had her shoes and stockings on, her skimpy panties and her equally skimpy bra. The way Red was built, small but richly full, her bras and panties "had" to be skimpy.

She had her arms around him in a split second, cradling his head against her breast, whispering endearments as she begged him to tell her what was wrong. Mitch explained sheepishly that he had been having a bad dream. Red kissed him again, murmuring an apology for not having been there.

She started to stand up. Mitch caught a hand in the waistband of her panties.

"You're here now," he said. "That's even better."

"But—but I—" She broke off, forcing a bright smile. "Okay, honey. Just let me get a hairnet on, will you?"

"No. No, wait," he said quickly. "You were going out this morning, weren't you?"

"Well, I was but it can wait. After all—"

Mitch said firmly that it shouldn't and wouldn't wait. She was all fixed up to go out, and he wasn't going to muss her up at the last minute. "I was just teasing you," he lied. "Now, you run on and I'll go back to sleep."

She did so, but he didn't. He lay with his eyes closed, a little restless perhaps, but glad that he had done as he had. He thought back to the beginning of their intimacy, and the viewpoint she had revealed to him.

She was a woman, she pointed out (quite unnecessarily) and he was a man. And a man and a woman needed something from each other that they could get from no other source. She had known that long ago, having grown up with a large family in a one-room shack. There would be times when she would be angry, and then he had better keep away from her. But otherwise he had only to ask or hint, and what he wanted would be freely given.

Why, my goodness, how else could it be? What if she didn't feel like it just then?

Most of the time she probably would, because she had never had anyone but him and there was a lot of catching up to do. But even if she didn't, there would be no problem. Why should there be, for pity's sake? It only took a few minutes—not nearly long enough, sometimes!—and if a woman couldn't give herself to a man for a few minutes, she just didn't love him!

The bed sank gently. Mitch started, and turned. And Red's' arms went around him.

""Ah, Mitch. Darling, darling, darling! I couldn't leave with my darling needing me... !""

""But baby—Your clothes...""

""Tear 'em off of me! Tear 'em off and muss me up! I can dress again, and I can get unmussed and... and... and... Mitch!""

An hour later she left on her delayed shopping trip—a peculiar kind of shopping trip, or one that would have been peculiar for anyone but Red. Every now and then, when they had some free time, she would go on such an excursion. Spending the day at it, limiting herself to a total expenditure of five dollars, and shopping only in dime stores.

It was a thing she had always dreamed about doing as a child, and unlike any adult Mitch had ever known, she seemed to be able to satisfactorily fulfill her child's dream: Moving cautiously from counter to counter; spending a dime at one and fifteen cents at another and a quarter at another; pausing to refresh herself with a frozen lollipop on a stick. She would even eat lunch in a dime store—a prospect which made Mitch's stomach turn! Then, having gorged on some hideous concoction such as wilted lettuce and creamed frankfurters (served by a pimply-faced girl
with red fingernails) she would return to the attack, so timing herself as to have the expenditure of her last dime coincide with the closing of the store.

She would be very touchy about the armload of "bargains" she brought home (they would disappear in a day or so, just where he never knew). Once he had teased her, asking if she had left anything in the store, and the color had risen in her cheeks and she had called him a mean stupid damned old fool. And then, heartbrokenly, she had begun to cry. He had held her, cuddled her small body in his arms, rocked gently to and fro with her as the great sobs tore through her breast. And there were tears in his own eyes, as at last he understood the cause of her sorrow; for it was his also, and perhaps everyone's. The loss of innocence before it had ever endured. The cruel shearing away of all but the utterly practical, as pastoral man was caught up in an industrial society.

She was an extreme case, yes, as was he. But the tenant farmer's shack and the hotel room were merely the outer limits of a world which inevitably shaped everyone. He did not need to wonder about her thoughts when her schoolbooks had related the adventures of Mary Jane and her Magic Pony. He suspected that in a different way they had been akin to his as he had read of the joyous conspiracy between Bunny Rabbit and Mr. Stork (while the couple overhead were damned near pounding the bed apart).

So she wept, and he wept a little with her. Not for the idealized dream of things past, but for the immutable realities of the present. Not for what had been lost but for what had never been. Not for what might have been but for what could never be.

Then, having wept, she sniffed, straightened and smiled. And she declared that she was going right out dime store shopping again. For everything else might be gone, but hope was not. And everywhere there was evidence that what could be dreamed could be realized.

This morning, as she always did, she had planned an early start. And despite the delay on his account, it was only a little after nine when she departed.

Some thirty minutes later, bathed, shaved, and dressed, Mitch was seated on the terrace, reading the morning paper while he ate a leisurely breakfast.

He could not remember when he had felt so content with himself, so sure that the world was an oyster on which he had an irrefutable claim. Houston was a hell of a town—hadn't he always said so? He had known it was going to be a good trip, and it was proving better than good. Thirty-three big ones from Stinker Lord, and another eighteen from Zearsdale. Fifty-one grand in the kitty and the month was still young!

Of course, the outgo had been terrific, too. But—

Turkelson stepped out on the terrace.

He hadn't knocked or rung the buzzer. He had simply opened the door with his pass key, and walked in, and taking one look at his face, Mitch could only thank God that Red was absent. For the manager was clutching something in his hand, a something that could only be one thing.

Checks. Thirty-three thousand dollars worth. All red-ink stamped with the words, PAYMENT REFUSED.

He had known what they were, but seeing them was another matter. He suddenly felt very empty; yet there was a cold and growing lump in his stomach. He could have yelled with the frustration of it, the damnable jinx that seemed determined to turn his best efforts against him.

And instead he laughed easily, and gave Turkelson a reassuring wink.

"It's all right, Turk." "It goddamned well wasn't all right!" "Just get that inside of you, and calm down."

Turkelson grasped the drink greedily. Mitch gently relieved his other hand of its burden.

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And instead he laughed easily, and gave Turkelson a reassuring wink.

"Some fun, hey, keed? Is that all they kicked back on you?"

"All!" the manager said. "My God, isn't that enough?"

"I mean, his legitimate expenses. His hotel bill. He paid that by check too, didn't he?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, that one cleared, Mitch. Twelve hundred dollars and something."

"And of course you gave him an itemized bill for it," Mitch nodded. "Well..."

So there it was. The Lords might not be able to prove the thirty-three grand had gone for gambling—they could not prove that Winnie hadn't simply kept the money. But proof was not an issue here.
They should have paid the checks. It had been unthinkable that they wouldn't pay them. But since they hadn't—

Turkelson dumped more whiskey into his glass, took a facereddening swig of it and ripped out a curse.
"Goddammit, Mitch, they can't get away with that! They can't now, can they?"

"We'll have to see. Or rather I will. For the present, it looks like they have done it."

"But—but it's not legal! They haven't got a leg to stand on!"

"Turk"—Mitch gestured with a trace of impatience. "What would you like to do? Turn it over to the hotel's attorneys? Have it dragged through every court in the country and us along with it? The Lords would do it you know. They've got lawyers up to the ying-yang, and they like to keep 'em busy."

"B-But Mitch... if you knew it was that way..."

Mitch snapped that they had both known it was that way. What they hadn't known was that it was going to be this way. "So all right, it is this way, and let's stop kidding ourselves that it isn't and that they can't do it to us. That's like telling a cop that he can't arrest you. Maybe he's got no right to, but he can sure as hell do it!"

Turkelson gave him a stricken look. Mitch immediately softened his voice.

"Now, it's going to be all right," he said. "I'll guarantee that it will. As things stand now, you're thirty-three grand short in your cash. How soon do you have to cover it?"

"Right away. The tariff and cash transcripts go to the home office every day. Of course, I could put the checks through for payment again, and still show 'em as a credit. But..."

Mitch told him he had better not. The checks were certain to bounce again, and an amount that large might arouse inquiries.

"We've crapped out, Turk. There's nothing to do now but pay off."

He took out his wallet and counted thirty-three thousand dollars onto the table, his mouth tightening unconsciously as he saw how little was left.

Turkelson looked embarrassed. "Mitch—I, uh, I'm afraid I don't have—"

"Forget it," Mitch said. "Just endorse the checks over to me." He hadn't expected Turkelson to return his ten percent cut of the deal. Turkelson had a mother whom he doted on; a hypochondriacal old battle-axe who had been wasting hospital space and her son's money as far back as Mitch could remember.

Troubled, but obviously relieved, the manager exchanged the checks for the cash. "This is a hell of a lick for you, Mitch. I know you pull down heavy, but are you sure you can take it?"

"I don't plan on taking it," Mitch said.

"Oh? What are—"

"See how fast you can get me a plane out to Dallas, will you? I've got to pack a bag."

He cut off any further questions by leaving the room. An hour later, having left a briefly explanatory note for Red, he was on his way.
Dallas.  
Big D.  
The New York of the Southwest.  
This is where you find it, mister. Whatever you're looking for, it's right here.  
Fashions? They come all the way from Paris to copy ours. Food? You've never lived until you've tried our restaurants. Financing? We'll take a flier on almost anything.  
The world's prettiest, best-dressed women—that's Dallas. The world's smartest, most aggressive business men—that's Dallas.  
This is where you find it, mister. Whatever you're looking for, it's right here.  
Want to buy a million-dollar jet plane? The first aisle over—right next to those two-bit fishing poles. Want a thousand-dollar-a-night girl? Here you are, sir, and worth every penny of it. Want to jump a broad for a buck? Just look around and you'll find someone as hard up as you are. Want to hire a thousand men? You bet—and you won't find a single Red-Fascist Communist-CIO labor agitator in the lot. Want to carry a gun? Well, now, that's all right. Want to give someone a schlamming? It can be arranged, sir, it can be arranged. Want to start a hate group? Welcome, friend.  
Just don't do anything controversial.  
It was around noon when Mitch stepped off the plane. He checked his bag at the airport, and rode the airline's limousine into downtown Dallas. Since the hour did not seem a good one for paying a call on Frank Downing, he stopped in at a bar and grille that he remembered from his last visit to the city. But he was not remembered by the personnel of the place.  
"Sorry, sir." The bartender idly swabbed the counter with a damp towel. It's against the law to sell liquor by the drink in Texas."  
"So what?" Mitch laughed, "You're a new man, aren't you? Where's Jiggs McDonald?"  
"There's no one here by that name, sir. Would you like a cup of coffee?"  
Mitch said angrily that he didn't want any coffee. He was tired and worried and hot, and getting a drink was suddenly very important to him. "Now, come on and give me a bourbon and water!" he demanded. "What the hell? I've been buying drinks in here for years!"  
"No, sir. We don't serve drinks here."
"The hell you don't!" Mitch jerked his head at a man a few stools away. "What's he drinking if it isn't booze?"
The man turned and looked at him, a man with a very broad face and a forehead that ended at his eyebrows. He rattled the ice cubes in his glass, then arose and moved down the counter to where Mitch was sitting.  
"What do you want?" he said. "Coffee or trouble?"
"I think I'll settle for some air," Mitch said, and he left the place very quickly.  
He felt like nine kinds of a damned fool. It was always stupid to start a beef, and he had done it without the slightest excuse. He was in the worst jam of his career, and he needed to be fast and smart. Smarter and faster than he had ever been before. Yet he had virtually stuck out his neck and asked to have his head kicked off!  
The incident left him badly shaken up. He forced himself to calm down, taking a long second look at his mental makeup. As a result, he cancelled an earlier plan to call on Teddy while he was in Dallas; to appeal to her to be reasonable in her demands. Teddy had never been reasonable. Only the wildest grasping-at-straws thinking had let him hope that she might be reasonable now.  
At any rate, his problem was an immediate one. Thirty-three thousand dollars or its approximate had to be had now. Without it, he had no future—none that Red would be a part of. Without it, he would be broke. And just how could a man be broke, Red would wonder, when he has a safe-deposit box full of money?  
He hailed a cab. The driver looked back over his shoulder as Mitch gave him an address.  
"Too early, mister. They won't be open this time of day."
"We'll see," Mitch said.
"I'm telling yuh. Why don't you let me take you to a real live place?"

"Why don't you," Mitch said, "for God's sake take me where I told you to? Are you going to do it or am I going to have to call Frank Downing and give him your name and license number, and tell him that I can't keep an appointment with him because—"

The cab started with a jerk. It moved swiftly, without further conversation from the driver, for the next thirty minutes until it reached the wrought-iron gateway to Downing's domain.

Mitch got out there and paid off the driver. At this innocuous hour, the gate was, of course, unlocked and he started up the long curving driveway to the house.

The neighborhood had been a very good one at one time. Even as it was crowded downhill by the expansion of the business and industrial districts, there had been a number of holdouts against the march of progress. People who had lived here almost as long as there was a city. People with four-story mansions (with two-story living rooms), and grounds that Occupied a square block.

Downing had picked up one of these magnificent old houses early in the area's transition period. He had restored and renovated it completely, and enclosed the grounds with a taste ful tapestry-brick wall. Aside from that, and certain essential modifications to the interior, the place was almost unchanged.

The front door stood wide open. The interior hummed with the activity of cleaning people—men and women with mops and brooms and vacuum cleaners. Beyond giving Mitch a polite glance or nod, they showed no interest in him. He was not their problem. He would be taken care of by someone whose problem he was.

Mitch met that someone very suddenly. He was starting down a small side corridor which led to Downing's office when a thin, tired-looking man lazed out of the shadows.

"Selling something, mist—" He broke off, a flicker of recognition in his eyes. "What d'you say, Mitch?"

"Who can kick?" Mitch said. They shook hands, Mitch with his right, the other man with his left, since his right was in his pocket. "Is the boss in, Ace?"

"You should know," Ace said. "He must have told you he would be or you wouldn't be here."

"Well, I'm afraid I don't have an appointment. I just happened to be in Dallas—"

"Tsk, tsk." Ace clucked his tongue reproachfully. "Be nice now."

Taking Mitch by the elbow, he guided him up the corridor to Downing's office. There he rapped on the door in a certain way, waited a moment and then moved inside with Mitch.

The gambler was seated at his desk; sharply dressed as always, except for his rolled-up shirt sleeves, slick-haired and freshly shaven. There was a pile of account books and ledger sheets in front of him, as well as a small adding machine. He was making a computation on it as Mitch and Ace entered, and he did not look up until he had completed it.

Then without a word of greeting or the smallest sign of surprise, he asked Mitch how he was on income taxes.

"You mean what do I know about them? Nothing," Mitch said. "I always hire an accountant."

"I hire three. You'd think that would be enough, wouldn't you?" Downing shook his head. "Three guys ought to be able to keep one set of tax records, and do it right."

"Well, those people have to be awfully careful, Frank. If they try to claim something you're not entitled to—"

Downing said that wasn't what he was kicking about. His trouble was that the accountants kept claiming too much. "I tell 'em not to, by God. I tell 'em to figure everything from the government's angle, and then tack on ten per cent. But will they do it? Hell, no! Okay, Ace."

Ace went out, giving Mitch an approving little pat on the back. Mitch accepted the offer to fix himself a drink, and Downing poured coffee for himself from a Thermos carafe. Taking a sip of it, he asked how Red was doing.

"I liked that kid. By God, I liked her! How come you didn't bring her with you?"

"I didn't know I was coming myself," Mitch said. "It was one of those spur of the moment things. You see..."

He explained about the checks. Downing listened expressionlessly. "And you want me to collect on them for you?"

"That's right. Or I'll discount them to you."

"Then go ahead and ask me. I'll smile when I tell you to go to hell."
"You're too good for your own good," Mitch sighed. "But what about the fifty grand you collected for yourself?"

"What about the sixty grand I spent collecting the fifty grand?" Downing shrugged. "I've got principles, pal, but they don't extend to your dough."

Mitch was disappointed, but not surprised. He said he guessed he'd better be running along; he had a date with a west-bound plane. "I'll get me in Big Spring tonight, and I can drive out to the ranch in the morning."

"Save yourself a trip," the gambler said. "I can get your head beat off here for free."

Mitch scoffed that the Lords couldn't be that bad. "Let's face it, Frank. This is still Texas and it's still the twentieth century."

"Why would I kid you?" Downing asked. "They'll push your tonsils right out your tail, Mitch. You'll have to take off your pants to brush your teeth."

"You're just saying that to cheer me up," Mitch said. "Well, thanks anyway, Frank. I—"

"Sit down."

"I wish I could, but—"

"Sit down," Downing said. "I've got some questions to ask you."

Mitch sat down, not liking it but accepting it; wondering at the change that had come over the gambler. Downing lighted a cigarette, studying him through the smoke.

"Now, lay it on the line for me. The Lords have let you know they don't want to pay those checks. Just how do you figure to make 'em? How do you figure to gain by walking right into their own private little kingdom?"

"I don't know," Mitch said. "It's simply something I've got to try."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Uh-huh, why? You're a gambler. You don't buck the odds. You've been pulling down heavy for years, and you've got a lot of years left to go on pulling it down. Yet here you are, pissing it all off on a long shot chance of collecting a few stinking bucks."

"Thirty-three grand stinks?"

"You know what I'm talking about," Downing said. "You've got a big kitty. You can afford to swallow a loss like this. Now, why don't you do it instead of jumping into a bear-trap?"

"Why, Frank," Mitch said lightly. "I didn't know you cared."

"I asked you a question. And about you I don't care. But I liked that redhead, and I know she's nuts about you. I figure it would just about break her heart if anything happened to you. So I want to know just why you're so damned anxious to get your head parted."

Mitch hesitated, seeking a way out, knowing that there was none. He said quietly, "I'm broke, Frank. There isn't any kitty."

"I figured," Downing nodded, "and Red doesn't know it. That's why you didn't bring her with you. If she knew the truth, she'd never let you do this."

"If she knew the truth," Mitch said, "she'd probably kill me."

Downing shook his head. "How could she do that when I'm going to? Or maybe you've got a real good reason for cheating the nicest kid I ever met."

"Ah, Frank, for God's sake... !"

"Let's have it!" Downing snapped. "Start talking and talk fast, or by Christ you won't be able to! You'll be at the bottom of the Trinity talking to the turtles!"

His saturnine face was white with anger. Mitch started talking and he talked fast.

He told the whole story, starting with his marriage to Teddy; then, going on to the birth of his son and the discovery that she was a whore. He told it all—his meeting with Red, his sincere belief that Teddy had died or divorced him, her unexpected reappearance and the years of blackmailing that had ensued.

"Well, that's it, Frank," he concluded. "That's the story. That's where the money went."

Downing looked at him, no longer angry so much as puzzled. "I guess I must have missed something," he said.
"Like why do you let this half-baked whore clip you for practically everything but your bean money?"

"I told you. To keep her quiet."

"And this was the only way? You couldn't think of anything better than taking from the woman who loves you to give to the one who hates you?"

"Well, what else—?" Mitch broke off, looking into the dead flatness of Downing's eyes. "No, Frank," he said quietly. "I couldn't do anything like that."

"Who said you had to? You don't have to have her killed, dammit. Just a little working-over would do the trick."

Mitch said again that he couldn't do it. He agreed that Teddy would never be satisfied, and that getting out of his present predicament would only postpone the inevitable showdown. He agreed that Teddy deserved anything that happened to her. But still.

It would be so simple, of course; so easy and swift and final. Just a few little words to the right people, and then no more trouble from Teddy. Yes, there "was" a chance that you might have trouble with those aforesaid right people. And there was every likelihood that solving your problems in this way would become a habit. You would become addicted to it, substituting it more and more often for talent and intelligence and all the other qualities which distinguished you from the animals you employed. Until, in the end, you were identical with them.

"I'm sorry, Frank," he said, and possibly he was sorry— the thing would have been so easy. "Maybe I'm a sap, but that's the way I am."

Downing scowled at him. Then, he laughed and spread his hands, seemingly accepting Mitch's perversity. "Well, skip it. It's your problem and I figure you can work it out. Need any scratch to travel on?"

"No, I'm not completely flat."

"Then, lots of luck with the Lords. You can use my name with 'em if you want to."


They shook hands. Downing bent back over his ledgers, and the adding machine began to click and hum. Mitch went out the door, too relieved by the gambler's geniality to consider the reason behind it. Without knowing it, he saw the reason—a double one—coming toward him as he emerged from the side corridor and entered the main one.

They were very boyish and gay-looking young men; black-haired, olive-skinned, trim and slender of build. They wore crisp white linen jackets, perfectly creased dark trousers and two-tone black and white shoes. Their names, their actual names—probably the only thing they had ever received from best-forgotten parents—were Frankie and Johnnie, and they were fraternal twins.

They had begun to snicker and whisper to one another, at first sight of Mitch. Suddenly, when he was only a few feet away (and doing his best to ignore them) they came at him with a rush.

"Mitch, sweetheart! How are you, baby? Now, aren't you the big, beautiful chunk of man!"

They flung themselves on him, squeezing his arms, slapping his back, sniggering and giggling at his obvious discomfiture. Mitch drew his elbows in, then abruptly shot them backwards, throwing the brothers against the wall.

"Now, I'm telling you bastards!" he said angrily. "You ever lay a hand on me and you'll pull back a stump!"

"Aw, now baby! We just wanted to kiss you."

"Get out of my way!" he snapped, and he pushed past them savagely, and their taunting sniggers followed him until he had left the corridor.

Appearances to the contrary, he knew the fag bit of the two was strictly an act. Another way of adding to their general obnoxiousness. That was how they got their kicks, Frankie and Johnnie. By making themselves hateful to people. It was another facet of the sadism which made their work a pleasure for them.

Mitch knew quite a bit about them—all of it unpleasant. What he didn't know was how they had ever managed to live so long.

He took a taxi back through town and on to the airport. After lunch, and after wiring Red of his plans, he caught a plane for Big Spring in West Texas.

It would be a several hours' drive from there to the Lord ranch, but it was the only nearby town large enough to have a car rental service. Also he had a friend in Big Spring... a man who just might be of help to him.
Having passed her fortieth year, Teddy was just about out of the business of turning tricks. She didn't need the money— for all her wild spending she could not begin to get rid of her blackmail from Mitch. Moreover, she could seldom recapture the excitement which the excesses of her body had once given her. And never at all unless the buyer of her favors was very young and very handsome. Unfortunately, the young and handsome men who were in the market for prostituted flesh invariably chose to buy it from young and pretty women. Which—whatever else could be said for her—Teddy was not.

She still had a good figure; not as extravagantly exciting as it had been, but good. She still had a reasonably good face. But forty is forty, or, rather, it is much more than forty for a whore, and to the young it is ancient. To her own generation of males, or those preceding it, Teddy still appeared a highly desirable woman. But just as she was rejected by the young, she also rejected the old—and she looked upon any man as old who was not a great deal younger than she. Such "old" men had always been repugnant to her. But what had once been a strong distaste for them was now a phobia. They filled her with a sickish terror, a feeling of incestuous violation, and she would almost choke with revulsion if one even came near her.

Women normally reach their peak of sexual desire in their early forties, so Teddy still wanted and needed men. But they had to be young. That was all that she asked of them—youth, not money. She was ready to give them money along with herself, if they were young and handsome.

Her need had led her into some unusual experiences.

Once she had hustled a guy on the street, a prim-looking youngster who wore white socks with black shoes, and she had taken him home with her, and there—of all things!—he had begged her to go down on her knees with him and pray for her soul.

Another time she had picked up a prospect in a bar, and taken him back to the apartment, and for a while it looked like he was going to be all right. He talked the lingo like an old head, and talk could be pretty exciting in itself. He sent out for a couple of jugs of good booze, and that was all right, too; Teddy's appetite for the whiz had increased with her years. But the hours went by, and she began to itch with her craving, and still he didn't get down to business. And finally when she was on the point of taking it away from him, he gave her his card—even Teddy recognized the name of the psychiatric clinic—and he also gave her fifty dollars. And he told her there would be another fifty for her, twice each week, when she reported to the clinic.

Teddy was outraged. An amazing case-history, was she? An untapped treasure of sexual source material! Why— why—!

""This is a wonderful opportunity for you, Mrs. Corley. You're still an attractive woman, and you have many years to live. Just give me your cooperation, and those years can be very good ones."


Teddy had stopped the outside hustling after that. There was just no telling what you might run into. She stayed in her apartment, and occasionally some former customer would drop by—someone who had been very young to begin with, and was still acceptably young. Occasionally, when the intervals between customers became too great, she would find successe in a messenger or delivery boy, or a bill peddler or— or—or any youngster who chanced to stray near her door. Once she had tried to hook the fourteen-year-old kid who delivered the newspaper, and the little bastard had yelled and run home to his parents. There might have been plenty of trouble about it, but fortunately for her no one paid any attention to the complaints of niggers.

Today, she was standing nude in front of the living-room's full-length mirror, fresh from her bath and critically admiring her body as she patted it dry with a towel, when she heard the knock on the door. It was one of those tricky little wiseguy knocks, a knock that suggested all sorts of exciting things to Teddy. Hastily, she snatched up a robe, her flesh already prickling with anticipation. She cracked the door open an inch, and peered Out, and then she flung it open wide. And delight welled up in her until she almost laughed out loud.

Two of them! Not one but two! And what a two they were! Black-haired, olive-skinned, and oh so beautifully, wonderfully young! Why, they hardly looked to be twenty, and they were laughing and carrying on like schoolboys. Their white linen jackets crackled with freshness, their shoes gleamed with polish and their trousers were flawlessly cleaned and creased. They were fresh and gay and boyish-looking, and yet they were obviously very much men. They were just what Teddy would have ordered if masculinity had been on order.
She didn't know who had referred them to her. The word got around in time, and who the hell cared how they had
got here? All that mattered was that they were here, and making the most of every delicious moment of their stay.

Frankie turned the latch on the door. He snickered, winking at Johnnie, and Johnnie snickered and winked at him.
Then they greeted Teddy in unison.

"Hi," they said.

"Hi," Teddy said.

"Hi," they said again. And then the three of them laughed together at having such good clean fun.

Teddy let the robe slide from her. She cast a provocative glance at them, and asked who would like to come in
the bedroom with her first. They said they usually did everything together, but Teddy put on a little pout at that. She
said she thought it would be much nicer, if they were good little daddies and were nice for their nice little mama,
and maybe they'd better match for turns.

"Sure, we'll flip for it," Johnnie said. "What'll you take, heads or tails?"

"Tails," Frankie said.

"I'll take tails too," Johnnie said.

"Now, wait a minute," Teddy laughed happily. "You both can't take tails."

They said of course they could; tail was what they had come for. And Teddy laughed again.

"I know, but—but you have to take different things, darlings. You see..."

They had been advancing casually, as the banter went on. Moving forward and sideways, so that they were now
separated by several feet and she was forced to turn from one to the other. Thus, she was looking at Johnnie when
Frankie spoke to her.

"How come," he asked, snickering, "you've got your asshole under your nose?"

"What?" Teddy gasped. "What did you—"

"He asked you if you were a stud with tits," Johnnie giggled, and she whirled in his direction.

"Now, look you two! Don't you—"

Frankie suddenly slugged her in the guts. She turned white, a greenish white. The air went out of her with a
rushing sound, and she doubled slowly and sank down on the floor, on her face. She felt paralyzed, unable even to
groan. She still made no sound when Johnnie gave her a vigorous kick in the butt.

"See?" he cackled. "It came up tails. We both won."

"She's all ass," Frankie said. "How can you tell the front from the back?"

He grabbed her by the hair and pulled her upright. Thrusting his face close to hers, he ordered her to come clean
with him. "You ain't really a dame, are you? Huh? You're one of those bitchy studs, ain't you?"

"Sure, she's a dame," Frankie said. "Look at them bubbies on her."

Johnnie said that that didn't mean anything; studs were always buying rubber bubs for themselves so that they
could pass for dames. "Look," he said. "See what I mean?" He swung his hand viciously, whipping it back and forth
against Teddy's breasts. She groaned at that—only breathlessness kept her from screaming—but Johnnie seemed not
to hear her.

"She didn't feel a thing, see? Because they ain't the real thing. She's just a phonied-up stud."

"You think so, huh. Well, maybe..."

Frankie suddenly grabbed her by the breasts, and twisted. Again she tried to scream, and was stopped with
another gutpunch. She fainted, and when she drifted back into consciousness, she was sitting on a burner of the
kitchenette stove. They were holding hands with her—holding them with her fingers bent back toward her wrists.
They spoke to her conspiratorially, as though letting her in on a delicious secret.

"Now, we're going to cook it a little, know what I mean, honey? So if you ain't a stud, you can holler and we'll
know you're for real."

"Naw, she'd better not holler. "You better not, get me, tutz?" We'll just do our cooking, and she can tell us if it
hurt afterwards."

There was a "click" as a burner was flicked on. It was not the burner under Teddy, but she was convinced that it
was. It clicked on and off, and each time she could feel the flame lick up her loins. She could feel it reach up inside
her, and she smelled the cooking flesh, heard the crackling and the sizzling as the flames consumed her. She could not scream—there were always those torturously bent-over fingers, the hands drawn back to slug her in the breasts. She could only endure, the silent tears flooding over her face, her flank muscles jerking convulsively, her very womanhood burning, burning, burning...

""Because you're not a dame, right? A dame don't louse up her husband, does she? She don't make things tough for her own kid."

""Oh, no, no no no no no no no nononono..."

""She's good to her husband, right? She gets herself a nice quiet divorce, and she never gives him no more trouble."

""Oh, yes, yes yes yes yes yes yesyesyes..."

""You want to be a woman or a stud?"

""A woman, a woman woman woman woman woman woman..."

Just short of the ultimate answer there is another, one that embodies all the truth and the glory, which justifies the life that is about to trade itself for death. One may see it but once, as the curtain closes on the stage of immediate concern. One sees it immediately for what it is, though it appears in many guises. Neither life nor death but something between the two as they suddenly become one.

There it is, the truth and the glory: In the space which separates the down-rushing body and the up-hurtling pavement, in the bridge linking the last yellow capsule and the one next to last, in the trillionth-inch between bullet and brain, in all those dark byways where man lifts his foot from life and steps across to death.

It must be there. Where else would it be when one has found it nowhere else? Why else would so many see it there?

So Teddy having not-quite-died, knew a happiness and a peace she had never known before. It was as though she had been drained of her filth as fear drove the hot urine from her body. All the shoddiness, all the vicious and degenerate urges were gone, and she felt clean and reborn.

Lying in bed with the sheets tucked modestly around her, she looked up lovingly at Frankie and Johnnie, and they beamed down at her. They felt very good themselves, as comfortably satiated as though they had used her in a way she had so often been used. They were also pleased at having done their job so well.

"Now, about that divorce, honey..."

"Oh, I'm going to get it right away! Oh, I can hardly wait to do it. Oh, I—"

"Yeah, sure, sure you will, baby. But what about money? You got the dough to do it on?"

Teddy babbled happily that she had lots and lots of money, and she mentioned the amount. The smiles of Frankie and Johnnie faded, and they exchanged a look of bitterness. It was, of course, out of the question for them to take the dough. Downing would find out about it—he had an unbelievable talent for finding out the closest-kept secrets of his minions—and since he had not explicitly told them to rob Teddy, they would be charged with bad conduct. And how about that anyway?

Downing had instructed them only to scare the hell out of Teddy, to see to it that she never again made trouble for Mitch. That was all, so that was all they could do. But it was really a hell of a note, wasn't it? Here was this lousy pig with a mattress full of dough, and they—

Wait a minute. Wait just a peanut-pickin' minute!

They couldn't whip her for the loot, but did that mean they couldn't perform an act of simple justice? Did it mean that they had to leave the pig loaded, while they, fine young men that they were, were in relative want?

Frankie and Johnnie exchanged another glance, their eyes bright with malice. Then, they turned back to Teddy, and her smile abruptly faded and she began to tremble with terror.

"That's not your dough," Frankie said coldly. "You squeezed it out of Mitch."

"B-B-But—"

"You're a stud," Johnnie said. "A broad don't steal from her own husband."

"B-But—but—"

"You're goin' to give it back to him," Frankie said. "It's his and you're goin' to give it back."

"She better give it back," Johnnie said. "She better move real fast about it."
Teddy's mouth worked, her two minds, conscious and unconscious, shouting contradictory orders. She must make no further trouble for Mitch—that thought had been firmly implanted in her. Yet what they were demanding would most certainly make trouble.

"Do it. Don't do it. Stay away from Mitch. Go near Mitch. What—what—"

The boys loomed over her threateningly, classic examples of the danger of a little knowledge. She tried to explain, incoherent with fear, her two minds muddling one another. And Frankie and Johnnie were deaf to her words.

"What're you tryin' to pull, pig? Sure, you don't make no trouble for Mitch. What about it? What's givin' him back his dough got to do with making trouble?"

"I—I—I—"

"It was wrong. It was right wrong. Whatever they said—"

"She likes the flame," Frankie said. "All these studs like the flame."

He flicked on his cigarette lighter, darted it at her. She started to scream, and Johnnie slapped her in the breasts. "How about it, pig?" he said. "How's it going to be? You going to take that dough back or not?"

Teddy said, "Oh, yes yes yes yes yes yes yes..."

She went to Houston that afternoon. Mitch was out of town, of course, so she gave the money to Red.
Big Spring.
The metropolis of nowhere. The beginning of Far West Texas.

Big Spring. Oil wells, refineries, tool and die works, machine shops, oil-well supply houses, big hotels, big banks, big stores, big people—in every sense of the word.

Walk softly here, stranger. Be nice. It takes time to get acquainted. What appears to be a hard-nosed attitude is simply frankness and economy of speech.

A merchant may tell you to go somewhere else if you don't like his prices. But it's a friendly suggestion, not an insult. A resident may stare at you a long time before answering a question—and he may simply shake his head and not answer at all. But he isn't being impolite. He wants only to think over his answer carefully—and naturally it would be rude to show no interest in you—and if he finally decides he has nothing to say, then how can he say anything?

It's an attitude born of the prairies, of the loneliness, of the infrequent necessities for speech since there were so few to speak to. It was born of the cattle industry, the distantly separated ranches, the need for deeds rather than words, the wisdom of carefully looking over all strangers.

You see, Big Spring "was" a cattle town not so many years ago. Just another wide place in a dusty road. A town like any other such town, built around the traditional courthouse square; its streets drifting with dust, its iron-awninged buildings baking under the incredible heat of summer, ice-painted with the North Pole blasts of winter.

That was how it looked when the two wildcatters first saw it—like the ass-end of Far Nowhere. The town, for its part, looked upon them with little more favor. The town had seen wildcatters—prospectors for oil—before, and this pair just didn't fit the picture.

There was first of all their drilling rig; a cable-tool rig, naturally, since the rotary had not then been perfected. It was one of those big Star-30 machines, a so-called "portable" rig which occupied two railroad flatcars with its accessory equipment. None of the harum-scarum wildcatter breed had ever owned such a rig—an outfit worth a not-so-small fortune. And these two were the last people in the world who should have owned it.

They were a middling-old man and his son. The father wore the unmistakable stamp of defeat, a man who had drilled one dry hole too many. The kid looked mean and snotty and very sick, and he was all three and then some.

Into the rig and the job it had to do, the old man had sunk his home, his furniture, his insurance policies; every nickel he could beg and borrow. That still left a hell of a hump to get over, for an outfit and a job like this, so the kid had kicked in for it. The kid was a loner, he'd been one almost since the time he was old enough to walk. Some things had begun to happen to him about then that shouldn't happen to kids, and maybe they could have been avoided and maybe they couldn't have. But it was all the same to him. He didn't ask for excuses, he didn't give any. As far as he was concerned, the world was a shitpot with a barbed-wire handle and the further he could kick it the better he liked it. As far as he was concerned, he had plenty owing to him. And he was hell on wheels at collecting.

He was now nineteen years old. He was suffering from tuberculosis, bleeding ulcers and chronic alcoholism.

Rig hands, drillers and tooldressers accompanied the old man and his son. Huge tractors were hitched onto the rig, and it was hauled eighteen miles out of town to the drill site. They had no road to haul it over, of course. A road had to be made, straight out across the tumbling prairie, up hills and over streams, through hub-high mud and sand.

It took a lot of money. They were in over their ears before they were ever rigged up. They started to drill, and the hole went down a hundred and twenty-five feet—and every inch of it was a high-priced waste of money. For the driller hadn't known his stuff, and he'd got a crooked hole. And you can't set casing in a crooked hole. You can't—when you're using cable tools—go down very far before your drill bit and stem drag on the side.

Wildcats are always Jonahs. You're in unexplored territory, and you never know what you're going to get into until you've already got into it and it's too damned late. This particular wildcatter had enough hard luck for a hundred wells.

The boiler blew up. The rig caught on fire. The mast snapped. The tools were lost in the hole a dozen times. The drill cable bucked and whipped, cleanly slicing off a tooldresser's head.

The kid announced that he had gone his limit; he had nothing left but his ass and his pants and they both had holes in them. His father said that they would manage some way, and he took over the financing from then on.
The well finally got drilled. It wasn't a gusher but it was a very respectable producer. Diffidently, the old man asked his son what plans he had for the future.

"You mean what do I want to be when I grow up?" the kid said sarcastically. "What's it to you, anyway? When were you ever interested in what I wanted to do?"

"Son, son..." the old man shook his head sadly. "Have I really been that bad?"

"Oh, hell, I guess not. But I'm just not much on talking about things. You talk about what you're going to do, you never get it done."

The father guessed that it was probably a slam at him. He had, possibly, always indulged too much in talk. "I suppose," he said timidly, "you've been counting on having a lot of money?"

The kid said, why not? They'd brought in a good well, and they had hundreds of offsetting acres under lease. Conservatively, they were worth several million dollars. "But I'll settle for a hundred and eighty-two thousand. I won't live long enough to spend any more than that."

"A hundred and eighty-two—Why that particular figure, son?"

"I've been keeping a little black book since I was seven years old. There are one hundred and eighty-two names in it, one for every rotten bastard who's given me a hard time. I've shopped around, and I can get them bumped off for an average price of one thousand dollars."

"Son—" The father shook his head, aghast. "What happened to you? How can you even think of such things?"

"Thinking about it is all that's kept me alive," the kid said. "I can die happy knowing that I'm taking all those bastards to hell with me."

The father decided that it was a good time to give his son the word. The kid listened with a kind of gloomy satisfaction, as one accustomed to seeing his dreams washed down the john.

"So we don't own anything, huh? You hocked it all to get the well drilled."

"I'm sorry, yes."

"What about the rig and the tools?"

"All gone. The trucks, our car, everything."

"Goddam," the kid said. "Those one hundred and eighty-two bastards could be dead right now for what this well cost!"

He had a right to be pretty damn sore about it, he felt, but somehow he couldn't be. Somehow, he wanted to howl with laughter, because when you thought about it, you know, it was really funny as hell.

He started to take a drink, and then decided that he didn't want any. He lighted a cigarette, noting wonderingly that he no longer had ulcer pains. He coughed and spat in his handkerchief, and there was no blood in the spit.

"My God," he told his father, and there was awe in his voice. "I'm afraid I'm going to live!"

He and the old man walked out of town together; they couldn't afford anything but the ankle express. With the discovery of oil, Big Spring was already burgeoning into a city. The old man turned and looked back at it from its outskirts, and there was pride in his defeated eyes.

"We did that, son," he said. "You and I. We caused a city to bloom in the wilderness. We've made history."

"We should have stood in bed," the kid said. But then he laughed and gave the old man an affectionate slap in the back. For his physical health was not all that had improved during the past two years.

Out there on the prairies where time had stood still for endless eons, out there where nature loomed large and man was small, he had gotten a new perspective on himself. And his once all-consuming problems had shrunk in size, and he had grown proportionately in the only way that growing matters. Out there he had discovered that a man could be much less and much more than the sum of his moments, and that what had been done could be undone by enduring.

Arm in arm, he and the old man went down the road together, not into the sunset, for that was behind them, but into the dawn or where the dawn would have been if it had been that time of day. They went down the road together, the old man and his kid, the kid became a man, and he got rid of the book with the one hundred and eighty-two names, getting rid of a lot else along with it. And it was the last book he ever compiled of that kind.
"That's quite a story, Art," Mitch laughed. "Is that really the way little Big Spring became big Big Spring?"

"You hintin' that I'm a liar?" his friend demanded crustily. And then he also laughed. "Well, that's pretty much the way it happened," he said. "It's a middlin' true story. No story can be gospel true unless you've got all the facts and the time to tell 'em, which is two gots I ain't got. You figure on savin' that bottle for yourself, or passing it like a gent?"

Mitch chuckled and passed the bottle of sour mash. His friend downed an enormous drink of it, without the slightest change of expression, and began rolling a brown-paper cigarette. He was eighty years old, Mitch knew, and he looked a healthy sixty. He was an ex-cowhand, ex-gambler, ex-rancher and ex-banker. He described his present vocation as gal-chasm' and booze-tastin'.

They were sitting in Mitch's room in the town's leading hotel. The old man could have written a check for the full value of the hotel, and the block it stood in. Yet he pinched out the coal of his cigarette, and put the butt into the pocket of his threadbare shirt.

Mitch had seen many old men do the same thing in these far-out western cities. Men with permanently bowed legs and faces as brown as saddle leather, and fortunes so large they could not even spend the interest on them. They sat around the hotel lobbies in Big Spring and Midland and San Angelo, reading newspapers that other people left behind, squeezing two or three smokes out of the same brown-paper cigarette. But it was not because they were stingy. They had simply grown up in an era and an area where there was little to buy and few opportunities for buying. The same newspaper might be passed around a bunkhouse for months, because a newspaper was a rare thing and something to be treasured. Similarly, a man was careful with his tobacco, for it might be a very long time before he could replenish his supply.

That was why the old men were as they were—because of the way they had lived as younger men. Because they had reversed the usual order of things, learning the value of everything with suitably little regard for its ephemeral, meaningless price.

"Let's see now," said Art Savage, Mitch's friend. "What was we talkin' about before you hid the whiskey and got me all confused?"

"Mrs. Lord," Mitch grinned. "And since when could anyone hide whiskey from you?"

"Don't get smart with me, bub. But about Gidge Lord— Gidge Parton, I always think of her. Used to tomcat around with her a lot before she married Win Lord. A leetle bit younger'n I was but that didn't seem to make her no never mind. Don't know just what might have come of it if Win hadn't edged in on me, because that Gidge was really a lot of gal...."

Savage paused, his faded blue eyes contemplating the past and its might-have-beens. Mitch brought him out of it by passing the whiskey bottle.

"So you haven't seen her in recent years?" he suggested.

"Who the hell says I ain't?" Savage demanded. "Sure, I seen her. Two-three months after she was married, we started gettin' together again. Didn't feel quite right about it in a way; it's always kind of conscience-some trillin' with another man's wife, y'know, and it ain't ever been healthy in Texas. But Gidge wanted to, and with Win boozin' and whoring all the time, I didn't feel too bad about it. We finally broke it up when she got pregnant. Reckon I'd've broke it up before then, if I'd had my ruthers, because a lot of Win's nastiness had rubbed off on her, and she could run him a close second for low-down. What the hell are you grinnin' about, anyways?"

"Me?" Mitch said innocently. "Well, nothing really. It just occurred to me that perhaps you were——"

"Don't you say it!" Savage said grimly. "Don't you dast say it! Anytime I see a thing like Winnie Lord, Jr., coming out of a place I been in, I'll pinch its head off. He's Win's begettin' and don't you ever think he ain't. The spittin' image of him. You ever seen the two of them together at the same age you couldn't have told 'em apart."

Mitch murmured reassuringly. He declared that he had never seriously thought that a fine man like Savage could father such a skunk.

"About these checks, Art. What do you think would be a good approach on them?"

"Sue. Have to pay off in the long run on good paper."

Mitch explained that suing was out of the question. Savage scratched his ankle with the toe of his boot and
reached for the whiskey again. It was just possible, he said, that suing wouldn’t do any good anyway; fella sued he might find a long line ahead of him.

"Come t’think of it, that’s probably why them checks wasn’t paid, Mitch. The way Gidge is feelin’ the squeeze, she ain’t paying nothing she can possibly get out of."

"Yes?" Mitch said. "I’m not sure I follow you, Art."

"What’s so hard to follow? The ranch is in trouble, money trouble, an’ it couldn’t happen to a nicer outfit."

"But how could it be, for God’s sake? Over a million acres of land and two or three hundred producing oil wells, and—"

Savage told him how it could be. Because the ranch didn’t end with its million acres. It stretched all the way to New York and on down to South America, and even over into Iran and the Far East. The ranch holdings included chain stores and apartment houses, and shipping and manufacturing companies, and so damned many other things that even Gidge Lord probably didn’t know what they were.

"Oh, sure, she’s got people runnin’ the shebang for her. Whole office buildin’ full of ‘em in New York, I understand. But the best people in the world can’t help you none if you don’t listen to ‘em, and they sure can’t make a dollar be in more’n one place at once." Savage paused, chuckling with grim satisfaction. "Told her a long time ago she was spreading herself too thin—just tryin’ to be friendly, you know. And you know what she told me?"

"Something pretty unpleasant, I suppose."

"It was, oh, it was unpleasant, all right. Not to mention downright dirty-mouthed. Had a mind to repeat it to her last week when she paid me a call, but I just don’t believe in talking that way in front of ladies even if they ain’t."

Savage revealed that Gidge Lord had tried to borrow money from him (without success, naturally!). The banks were loaded with her paper, and would take no more, and she was now beating the bushes for private money. She needed twenty million—or so she had told Savage—and she was short more than half of it.

"I told her if she was so hard up she’d better clamp down on Winnie, but o’course she’d never do it. Prob’ly couldn’t, short of killin’ him, and anyways I guess what he blows in doesn’t stack up to a lot when you need as much as she does."

"I suppose not," Mitch said. "Particularly when he can have so much fun without paying anything for it."

"Oh, sure. They’re real fond of doing that."

They finished the bottle, the old man drinking most of it. Mitch saw him to the door, and they shook hands.

"Well, thanks for dropping in, Art. Let’s get together again when I’m out this way."

"Anytime," Savage said. "You just whistle an’ I’ll come arunnin’. Did I tell you anything helpful?"

"Helpful?"

"Uh-uh. For when you go out to the ranch tomorrow."

"Well, I’m not sure. But—"

"Then I’ll tell you somethin’ now. Don’t go."

He nodded firmly and went down the hall to the elevator, very erect, swaying with the teeter of his boots.

At eight o’clock the next morning, Mitch started for the ranch.

His first forty minutes or so were on the highway, and easy going. He turned off it onto a county road, which twisted sharply and constantly at its township lines and ended abruptly, after some twenty miles, at the side of a small mountain.

A three-strand barbed-wire fence ran along the base of the mountain. From the top wire, a rusted tin sign swung gently in the incessant West Texas wind:

LORD
Keep Out

The fence followed a rutted trail which led off across the rolling grasslands in a southwesterly direction. Mitch turned into the trail, wincing as the car’s crankcase dragged dirt. He drove very carefully, running in low gear much of the time. The car bounced and pitched, and a ribbon of steam seeped out from under the hood.

The Lords had little interest in roads. They traveled by plane and helicopter. A spur railroad led into the ranch from its other side, bringing in what they wanted to buy and taking out what they wished to sell. Since they seldom
used roads themselves, then, naturally, they would not contribute to their upkeep. County and district tax boards had long since given up trying to make them.

In less than an hour, Mitch was forced to stop to let the car cool off. With the hood raised, he leaned against a fender and mopped the dust from his eyes. He looked down the shambling line of the fence, the tin warning signs swinging from it at fifty-foot intervals, Lord—Keep Out, and he thought, "Okay, so I believe you!" On perhaps every fifth or sixth fence post was the bleached skull of a steer, grisly testimony to the truth that ranching is not a gravy train. One of these mementos grinned at Mitch from a few feet away. The horns were tilted at a rakish angle, and the fleshless jaws hung open as though speaking to him.

He turned away from it suddenly. He said aloud, "My God, what am I doing here?" And he had no sensible answer to the question. He had come here because he didn't know what else to do. Because there was always a chance in the seemingly most chanceless situation. Not much of a chance, maybe. A much better chance doubtless of getting your butt kicked off. But there was a chance, and if he could see it and act on it, he could still stay even with the game. He could still have Red. And if he missed it, that one-in-a-million chance—

Well, nothing would matter much, anyway.

He got back in the car and drove on. Rather grimly, his jaw set; fighting down the insistent queasiness of his stomach. This had to be done, the long shot risk had to be taken. But all his gambler's instincts cried out against it, and all his years of civilized living shrank from it. It had been a very long time since he had traveled in circles where clobbering was an accepted practice. He wondered if he was still up to it, and he guessed he would find out very soon.

The trail rose gently for a mile or more, then dropped into a softly swelling flatland. The brutal scrub-oaked cliffs and rocky hummocks were abruptly gone, and the emptiness around them was gone, and the land was filled with the evidence of life.

Pumping jacks and stub-derricks marched across the countryside. Telephone poles, heavy with cross-braces and cables, appeared out of nowhere. White-faced cattle moved over the grass like a slowly unrolling carpet, spread out in an endless array of thoughtfully munching jaws and lazily switching tails until they were lost in the horizon. Far off to the right were the glimmering white outlines of the ranch buildings. Behind them a plane arrowed up into the sky and disappeared in its brilliance.

The trail took another right-angle turn. A mile later it ended at a cattle-crossing and gate. Immediately inside the gate, blocking the graveled road which stretched up into the ranch, stood a jeep. It carried the thick aerial of a radio transmitter. A young cowhand sat in it, talking over the phone, his white teeth flashing occasionally as he laughed.

He gestured a greeting at Mitch with the barrel of his rifle, then pointed it, shaking his head as Mitch started to get out of the car. Mitch stayed where he was. A couple of minutes later, the cowhand hung up the phone and came over to him.

He wore a gunbelt and gun—the first cowhand Mitch had ever seen so equipped. He also kept his rifle with him. He thrust his tow-colored head through the window, his mouth parted in a wide grin, and said, "Uh-hah?"

Mitch explained that he wanted to see Mrs. Lord and her son, and the grin—it was meaningless, mirthless—widened.

"Winnie ain't here. What'd you want to see his maw about?"
"It's a personal matter."
"Too personal to tell me?"
"I'm afraid so, yes."

The cowhand moved his rifle, scratching it against the side of the car, and pointed with it. "That's the road back to town, mister. The same one you came in on."

Mitch told him about the checks. He told him in complete detail, for the man would be satisfied with nothing less.

Then, he sat back to wait, his heart thumping a little, as the cowhand telephoned from the jeep. The call lasted a long time, or so it seemed to Mitch, and the cowhand seemed to be laughing through most of it. At last he hung up, backed the jeep off the road, and motioned for Mitch to come ahead.

Mitch did so, bumping across the cattle guard. The man signalled to him again and he stopped abreast of the jeep. White teeth flashed at him. "Straight ahead, mister. Can't miss it."
"Thanks," Mitch said. "Thanks very much."

"Don't turn off nowhere. Start strayin' you'll get shot."

Mitch nodded and drove on. The road peaked a long, almost indiscernible slope, and then he was looking down into the orderly chaos of the ranch buildings.

They were arranged in a series of ragged open-end squares, with the white adobe ranch residence in the center. It was two stories and roofed with heavy red tiles. A tile-roofed veranda or "gallery" extended across its length at the first floor level, shading the homey assortment of lounging chairs beneath it.

A hum of activity arose from the buildings; ambiguous, blending together. The roar of a jeep, the cracking of a radio, the clatter and click of machinery—voices in blurred conversation, an outburst of muted laughter, a loud shout of "What the goddam hell are you—?" ending with the sudden roar of a tractor.

Men moved in and out of the lanes between the buildings. A man carrying a saddle over his shoulder, two men driving a jeep, two others lugging some heavy metal object. A white-aproned old man flung dishwater from a distant window, and a man rose up from beneath the window and shook his fist angrily.

Mitch parked the car in the packed-down gravel of the courtyard. He got out, and started across the patchy grass lawn to the house, then turned as a voice hailed him.

"Corley!"

Off to the left, immediately beyond the inside square of buildings was a stub derrick, the site, apparently, of an abandoned or pumped-out well, since no jack or lines ran to it. Two ranch hands and a girl had emerged from its sheet-iron enclosure, the girl striding in the lead. She raised her hand as Mitch turned, indicating that it was she who had called. He waved back a little diffidently, and started toward her.

She must be a member of the family; no woman employee would be out consorting with cowhands. Yet he had heard of no female Lords, aside from Mrs. Lord, and he "would" have heard of this girl.

She was so tanned that he couldn't tell what her face looked like. In fact, he hardly gave her face a passing glance. He looked at her body and he could not look away, for the girl seemed naked. Naked, yes, despite the riding pants and the blouse, because that was the way she was built. You could have bundled her up in a dozen overcoats, and she still would have been wearing nothing, and she would have known it and liked it. Because she was built that way, too.

She was a bitch with her tail up. She came toward him bitchily, the svelte hips swaying with promise, the extravagant breasts bobbling and jiggling. And the heat welled out of her from fifty feet away.

He tore his gaze away from her, the thrusting lewdness of her body. He rubbed his eyes, as though rubbing the sun out of them, and then her boot heels clicked on the packed earth, and he at last looked into her face.

Looked and was almost sick.

For what he had thought was a girl was a woman. An old woman. Which meant that she had to be Gidge (Agatha) Lord.

Her hair was not blonde but a dirty gray. The face beneath it was burned to a deep brown; withered and shrunken as though by some savage headhunter's rite. Her eyes were so pale that they seemed colorless, all milky whites. He could hardly see her mouth until she opened it—only a brown wrinkle in the deeper brownness of her flesh.

She held out her hand. Mitch started to extend his, and she viciously slapped it away.

"The checks, Corley! Let's have them!"

"I'll be glad to," Mitch said. "In exchange for thirty-three thousand dollars."

"Give!"

The cowhands had lounged up to her sides and a little past, forming the ends of a half-circle. They stood with their thumbs looped in their belts, their jaws chewing lazily as they held him in a cold, unwinking stare.

Mitch shrugged lightly, managing a surprisingly cheerful grin. "Well..." He passed over the checks. "As long as you insist..."

Taking out his cigarettes, he made a gesture of passing them around. He beamed confidence and good-nature at the two men, trying to bring them under the sway of his personality, fighting with the only weapons he had. The men remained exactly as they were, thumbs looped in their belts, eyes staring unblinkingly, acknowledging his existence only as something potentially interesting but thoroughly unimportant.
Mrs. Lord examined the checks, one by one.
Then she ripped them to pieces, and hurled the pieces into Mitch's face.
"You filthy prick! You know what we do to pricks around here?"
"I'll bet you're going to tell me," Mitch said.
"I'm going to show you! What do we do with pricks, Al?" There was a low chuckle from behind Mitch. "Put 'em in a hole, ma'am."
Mitch whirled, but he wasn't fast enough. Nothing would have been fast enough. There was no running from a spot like this. The rope sang and dropped over him. It jerked and he flew off his feet. His head banged down hard on the stony dirt, and a million skyrockets went off at once and he passed out.
When he came to, he was being hoisted up on the floor of the stub derrick. His feet were firmly tied now, although his hands and arms were free. He pushed himself up, rubbing the dirt out of his eyes.
A couple of men were prying up a square of planks in the middle of the floor. Two others were stringing a block and cable in the derrick. Another, a very young man, was standing with his arm around Mrs. Lord, his hand patting one of her flaring buttocks.
They saw Mitch looking at them, and laughed. But they moved a little apart.
Mitch massaged his aching head, and glanced up into the rig. As he did so, one of the men there swung out and down, riding a cable. He came down, and Mitch suddenly went up. Shot up feet first into the derrick.
He went up about thirty feet. Then he came gently down, until he hung poised over the gaping hole in the derrick floor.
Gidge grabbed him by the hair, thrust her hag's face close to his. "Want to guess what you're going to get now? Think you can guess, hmm?"
But Mitch didn't need to guess. He knew.
Practically all modern oil wells are sunk with rotary rigs, which drill with bits attached to pipe. As the well deepens, more lengths of pipe are added, thus making a hole—a relatively small one—which is the same size from top to bottom. Old oil wells, however, any well drilled, say, before 1930, were drilled with cable tools, which made a hole by dropping a bit from a string of cable. This method required the frequent setting of casing (pipe), to protect the drilling tools from caveins. Naturally, each string of casing had to be smaller than the preceding one. This also meant, of course, that where a deep well was contemplated, the hole at the top had to be very large.
The hole Mitch was dangling over was old and huge; the so-called "big hole" of a deep test. But no well had been drilled. Two hundred feet down the bit had struck an unexpected vein of granite, and there was nothing to do but pull out and try another location.
The Lords had left the hold unplugged, planning just such use for it as it was now being put to. Their reputation being what it was, however, they had not had an opportunity to use it for a long time.
Mitch went down through the hole in the floor, and into the hole in the ground. He did not struggle. It was useless. His one hope was to make it as simple and painless as possible.
He held out his hands in front of him, like a diver, keeping his body stiff and straight. Going down crooked or twisted could result in serious injury. He sank into the yawning darkness smoothly, brushing but not scraping the sides of the hole. The blood rushed to his head and his brain roared with it. But he kept a firm hold on his nerves.
This was going to be damned bad. But nothing more than that. He wasn't going to die. They weren't going to kill him.
He held onto that thought as he went deeper and deeper into the hole. Repeating it over and over, "They won't kill me, they won't kill me"...
And he was wrong.
They "were" going to kill him.
Unintentionally.
Water had seeped into the hole since its last usage. No one knew it, it couldn't be seen from the surface. But it now stood more than half full of water.
Mitch went into it headfirst, and it closed over him.
Frank Downing, the gambler, had never been a sound sleeper. Too many of his years, particularly the early ones, had been lived in a world where sound sleepers suffered fatal accidents. He was a considerable distance removed from that world now, of course, but habit was strong in him, and he still slept in starts and snatches; feeling no impelling urge to sleep until it was too late, and he had to get up.

He liked to have a minimum of six cups of coffee before breakfast. With and after the meal, he would have a minimum of six more cups, by which time he was prepared to be reasonably affable to people—in his own way, of course, providing he felt them deserving of affability.

He had never felt that Frankie and Johnnie were deserving of it. He had to use them, yes (or at least he thought he had to), but what they deserved, in his opinion, was what they were so fond of dishing out. And he had secretly yearned for an excuse to give it to them for a very long time.

Since his evenings and nights were extremely busy, they had not been able to report back to him on the day of their visit to Teddy. Oh, they could have, if they had tried. But they had wanted to make the job look harder and more timeconsuming than it was, so they had delayed until the following morning.

It was the morning after one of Downing's most sleepless nights. Moreover, being anxious to make a good impression, they arrived early for their appointment, thus finding him several cups of coffee short of his absolutely essential dozen. Then, they told him what they had done, giggling and snickering, very pleased with themselves. And his hand jerked at the news, and he slopped an overflowing cup of coffee on himself.

He caught their smirks and winks, as he tried to mop up with a napkin. But no one would have guessed that he did. He seemed wonderfully good-humored, as though losing a night's sleep and having his sacred waking-up schedule disrupted and spilling coffee all over three hundred bucks worth of clothes and having his strict orders disastrously emended by a couple of punks—as though all these had been delightful and heart-warming experiences.

"Goddammit, he thought. That blows it for Mitch! It could have been a cinch, and these stupes have to act smart!"

He smiled genially at them, and complimented them on their astuteness.

"Smart," he said. "Yes, sir, that was plen-ty smart. Funny I didn't think of it myself."

"Oh well"—Johnnie excused him patronizingly. "A man can't think of everything."

"Mmm-hmm," Downing murmured. "A man can't think of everything. That's pretty shrewd, Johnnie, I'll have to remember it."

"Anyway," Frankie cut in, "you didn't know that she had all that loot. I guess you would have, if you'd stopped to think about it, but—"

But there you were, Downing said. A man couldn't think of everything. "Guess I'll have to hire you boys to help me do my thinking," he added. "Excuse me a minute, will you?"

He left them briefly. Returning, he sat down in front of them on the edge of his desk. His hands were thrust in the pockets of his coat. Each hand gripped a roll of quarters.

"By the way," he said. "How did you boys happen to know Mitch's address?"

"Oh, she knew. Teddy knew where to take the dough," Johnnie smirked. "Keeping tabs on Mitch was kind of her business."

"But she's in a new business from now on," Frankie snickered.

Downing jerked his head at them confidentially, drawing them in close. "Got something funny to tell you guys. You'll get a bang out of it...." He grinned widely, his hands tightening on the rolls of quarters. "Mitch is away from Houston for a couple of days. Anyone that called on him would see the gal he lives with, a real hot-tempered babe who doesn't know that he—"

Frankie and Johnnie didn't wait to have it spelled out for them. They flung themselves backward, trying to make a break for it. Downing's loaded fists lashed out.

He got them both in their pretty pans, with a lightning swift one-two. Then, as they spun, he swung with a doublearmed backhand, again connecting with such force that they crashed against opposite walls of the room.

They were still out to the world some ten minutes later when Ace came in. He gave them a raised-brow look,
shook his head deprecatingly at Downing.

"You shouldn't let guys sleep in here, boss. It don't look good."

"There's something in the atmosphere, I guess," Downing said. "They dozed off right while I was talking to 'em."

"Well, that was kind of rude," Ace said, frowning at the recumbent youths. "How's your hearing these days, boss?"

"Not so good. The last guys you bounced around in the alley, I couldn't hardly hear it at all."

Ace expressed alarm. After all, he pointed out, the alley was only a hundred yards away. "You suppose we ought to run another test?"

Downing thought that they should. Ace awakened Frankie and Johnnie.

He was very good at waking people. Even those who seemingly would never waken again. The boys were on their feet in a matter of seconds, howling and dodging and making many of the same kinds of noises that Teddy had made.

Ace took them out in the high-walled alley.

"Now that," said Downing, a hundred yards away, "is a test!"
Darkness...
"Black wet no dark light and"
"Smothering strangling and breath wind downup up up biting slicing legs burning yank high low"
"Racing air and light light joggle run bump slam sound of slam mumbles and shouts voices light light breath and
coughing strangling burning chest and"
"Voices whiskey coughing brush knock away"

Mitch kept his head ducked, lips clenched against the pressing whiskey. He kept his eyes closed peevishly,
mumbling with simulated incoherence. Fully conscious but wanting time to size things up.

He was soaked, dripping with the oily slime from the well. Several people were around him, cowhands
seemingly; mumbling and fumbling as they tried to revive him. He was sitting slumped on a leather lounge. The
room he was in was apparently a large one, for Gidge Lord's voice drifted to him from a considerable distance away.

"... Oh, no! Certainly not. There's nothing at all wrong. He just stepped outside for a... Just a moment, please. I
believe he's coming in right now..."

She laid the phone down on the desk, as Mitch at last opened his eyes. Frantically, motioning for the cowhands to
get out, she hastened across to him.

"I'm sorry as hell, Corley! I swear to God I didn't know that hole was—"

Mitch weaved to his feet—weaved deliberately. There was something that had to be figured out here: the reason
for Mrs. Lord's alarm, her downright panic. The clue that might lead to that one-in-a-million chance.

"Please, Corley..." She was hanging onto his arm, her magnificent torso moving against his, as she guided him
toward the desk. "Don't crumb me with him, please! Don't knock me, for God's sake! Tell him everything's okay,
and I swear I'll..."

She smiled at him with her leathery face. The milky eyes pleading, beaming good will.

Mitch picked up the phone, and spoke into it. A harsh, strangely musical voice came over the wire. And
immediately he had the clue to the riddle.

The banks were loaded with Gidge Lord's paper. They would lend no more, so she had been beating the state of
Texas for big private money. And one of the most obvious prospects for a huge private loan, a man who would
instantly know the worth of the Lord holdings and see the opportunity in their mismanagement, was—

"Mr. Zearsdale," Mitch said. "It's good to hear from you so soon."

"It's nice of you to say so," Zearsdale purred. "Your sister told me I might catch you there."

Mitch said that the call had come just in time. He might have been gone in another minute. Zearsdale said he was

glad to hear it.

"As long as you're through there, you can come to a little party I'm giving tonight. Your sister wants to come, if
it's agreeable with you."

"Well, thanks very much," Mitch said. "What—eight o'clock? Hang on for a moment, will you?"

He started to turn to Mrs. Lord. Zearsdale's suddenly sharp voice stopped him. "Is there some trouble there, Mr.
Corley? Be frank with me, please. The ranch doesn't have a reputation for friendliness."

"Well—" Mitch hesitated.

"I suggest that you tell Mrs. Lord I've invited you to a party at my home tonight. Tell her I'll be very disappointed
if you're not there."

"Well, the fact is," Mitch said, "we have a little business to wind up. It could be wrapped up in no time, if we
could get right down to it. But—"

"Then tell her to—No, let me talk to her."

Mitch passed over the phone. As she took it, spoke into it almost cringly, he added her attitude to Zearsdale's
peremptory one and arrived at the only possible conclusion.

She already had her loan, or a big part of it. Made on demand notes, naturally, since Zearsdale would accept no
term paper in a situation that might go sour overnight. So she was over a barrel, Gidge Lord was. She had to be nice, very very nice, or she would take a painful pecuniary paddling right on her astonishing ass.

She handed back the phone, smiling, grimacing rather; literally groveling in appeasement. Mitch winked at her, and she went to a wall safe, begun turning the combination.

"Mr. Corley..." Zearsdale said again. "I'm sure Mrs. Lord understands the situation now."

"I'm sure she does, too," Mitch said. "Thanks very much."

"Not at all. By the way, I've got a jet over in Midland. Give you a ride home, if you like."

"Thanks," Mitch said, "but I may as well use the other half of my round trip. I'll tell you what I might do, if it won't inconvenience you..."

"Yes?"

"It's a long, rough ride back to Big Spring. Why don't I check with you from there in two or three hours, so that you'll know I haven't, uh, haven't had any accidents."

"You do that." Zearsdale caught his meaning immediately. "You do that, Mr. Corley."

They hung up after a moment or two of polite nothings.

Mrs. Lord closed the safe and came back to the desk. She counted out thirty-three thousand dollars, and pushed it across to him.

"Would you like to clean up a little? I can give you some other clothes, too."

Mitch said that sounded good to him, but his immediate need was for a drink and a cigarette. She provided them quickly, also pouring a drink for herself. Then, spoke to him nervously as he settled back in his chair.

"Maybe you'd better sort of hurry, hmm? You've got to be back in town in a few hours."

"Oh?" Mitch took a deliberate taste of his drink. "You think I might have trouble getting there?"

"You'll get there, all right! You'll get there if I have to carry you on my back!"

Mitch chuckled wickedly.

He wasn't inclined to pour it on anyone when they were down, but Gidge Lord wasn't just anyone. She was darned near a murderer. His. He felt entitled to needle her a bit.

"I'm a professional gambler," he pointed out. "I come out here alone, and face up to an army of your thugs. And I make you pay off like a slot machine. I think the experience should prove very good for you, Mrs. Lord."

"So?" She left it at that, not saying any of the things that she might have said. That Zearsdale probably didn't know he was a gambler, that it was Zearsdale, and Zearsdale alone, who was making her behave.

She had had to take a beating. That was the fact, and to hell with the why.

"You're not even curious?" Mitch teased. "You don't wonder why a man like Zearsdale would go to so much trouble over me?"

"No," she said flatly, "I'm not curious, Corley. But maybe you should be."
Mitch got back into Big Spring early in the afternoon. After checking with Zearsdale, he shucked out of his borrowed duds, took a long, hot bath and re-dressed in some he had brought with him. Then he called Red, asking her to meet him when he arrived in Houston.

She sounded a little cool and strained. But that, he thought, was natural enough. He had left town without giving her a chance to object—and she "would" have objected to a trip as perilous as this one. Now that he was out of danger, she meant to punish him for the scare he had given her.

He would have some pretty tall explaining to do, he decided. Or maybe, since this had been such a foolishly dangerous thing to do, it was best not to try to explain. Just to say that he’d lost his temper when the checks bounced, so off he’d gone into the wild blue yonder, knowing it was crazy but doing it anyway.

Red could understand a loss of temper. Who could understand better than Red?

The fact was he was just feeling too damned good to be worried about anything.

He had dinner on the plane. The stewardess was a Dallas girl, immediately stamped as such by her smartness, her glossy sophistication. She bantered with the man seated next to Mitch, a resident of Fort Worth; no yokel by any means, but a little on the drawly side, hearty and easygoing of manner. Mitch listened to them... the voices, the attitudes, of east and west... and behind him he heard a South Texas cotton grower disputing with a North Texas wheat farmer. And he was struck as he always was (when he had time to think of such things) by the amazing amalgam, the populous paradox that was this, his native state.

Between areas, there were not only differences in accent but in language itself. A pond, for example, became a "tank", biscuits were "bread", cookies were "cakes", afternoon was "evening", carry meant "escort" (to carry a girl to a dance), dirty was "nasty" (a nasty shirt), and meat was automatically construed to mean pork, unless qualified as "red" meat.

There were differences in dress, too many to be noted, yet intermingling with one another in these days of rapid transportation. There were differences in outlook, from one area to another, and these positively did "not" intermingle. In Houston, no Negro was admitted to a white restaurant—not even if he was a foreign potentate. In Austin, there were Negroes on the faculty of the University of Texas. In one city, a minority group had absolutely no voice in municipal government. In another (El Paso, for example), the minority spoke loud, clear and effectively.

That was Texas. That was not Texas. Because it was a generalization, and you could seldom if ever generalize about Texas. In so doing, you were apt to be guilty of the very narrowness you deplored. You were in a boat not-too-distant from that of the foreign viewers of popular American films, people who "knew" us to be a nation of sexpots and gunslingers, stopping only long enough to get sloppy drunk as we went about the business of shooting and screwing one another.

You could still find Texans who made a brag of ignorance. They hadn't never read no book but the Bible. They hadn't never been out of the state in their lives. ("An' I ain't goin' to neither.") The fault was probably rooted far back in the history of the state, in an official attitude—promulgated by backwoodsy legislators—which saw little reason to keep a child in school if his folks didn't, and who believed that eleven grades of school (instead of twelve) were quite enough for any youngster.

Texas had raised its educational standards a great deal in recent years. But some of the old ideas still lingered, and they were by no means all bad, although some people might dispute this. Newcomers often objected to the schools’ seeming intrusion into the province of the parent. Their emphasis on manners and decorum. But their objections went unheeded, and after a time they were usually withdrawn.

Before he was ever taught his ABC’s, the Texas schoolchild learned respect for his elders. He learned that men (gentlemen) were always addressed and replied to with sirs, and that ladies (all women were ladies) were always spoken to with ma'ams. Similarly he was taught to say please and thank you and excuse me—the rule being that you could never say them too often. He was taught courtesy and gallantry, and concern for the weak and elderly. And if he was slow in learning and remembering these teachings (no matter how brilliant he was academically) he would find himself in serious trouble very quickly.

So, after all, then, there was one generalization you could make about Texas. You could say flatly and positively that the wanton and open flouting of every principle of decency and fair play which was becoming commonplace in other states was wholly foreign to Texas. There had never been anything like that. There never would be.
Hypocrisy?—Yes, you would find that. You would find approval for it. But if a man was a bum, he had better not
demonstrate the fact in public.

In some cities of America, the streets were roamed by gangs of rowdies: overgrown louts who had been
slobbered over far too long by professional do-gooders and who needed nothing quite so much as a goddamned
good beating; sadistic thugs who were as whimperingly sensitive about their privileges as they were blind to their
obligations, who showed no interest at all in the common privileges of soap, water and hard work; human offal who
demanded everything of their nation, and who contributed nothing to it but their plethoric progeny which a
responsible citizenry was forced to provide for.

And this scum, these outrageous brutes, prowled the streets of those American cities, knocking down wholly
offensive citizens, publicly committing robbery, mayhem and murder. Doing it because they knew they could get
away with it, that a hundred people might look on but not one would interfere.

Well, so be it. But such shameful spectacles were not seen in Texas.

No Texan would have stood idly by while a dozen slobs stomped a decent man to death.

No Texan, regardless of whether he was nine, nineteen or ninety, whether he was rich or poor, whether he was
bigot or liberal, whether he was outnumbered a hundred-to-one— no Texan, you could be sure, would look on
unconcerned while a woman was being raped.

At Dallas, Mitch had a half-hour layover between planes. He entered a phone booth and placed a call to Red,
intending to tell her that he was running a little late. But the apartment didn't answer, and the clerk cut in after a
moment or two, advising him that Red had left for the airport a few minutes before.

That was reasonable enough, of course, traffic being what it was. Mitch started to leave the booth, then turned
and put in a call to Downing.

It was a courtesy owing the gambler, he felt. He had taken his hard luck story to Downing. Downing was now
entitled to hear the happy ending.

"Just off for Ghent," he said, as the gambler's voice came over the wire. "Thought I'd tell you the news from Aix
is strictly copasetic."

There was a heavy silence. Then a very feeble chuckle from Downing.

"Poetry yet, huh? I think they had it the decade I missed class. Didn't the guy get a bottle of wine poured down
his throat for bringing the good news?"

"I thought you'd never remember," Mitch laughed. "Thanks, Frank, but I can't make it tonight. Just here between
planes."

Downing sighed. He said he had a little poem for Mitch. "It goes like this, pal. 'Here I sit all brokenhearted.'"

"Yeah?" Mitch smiled expectantly. "What do you mean, Frank?"

"I mean I reversed the habits of a lifetime and tried to do you a favor. And the way it turned out—well, you better
brace yourself before I tell you..."

Mitch braced himself.

It didn't help a bit.
Mitch took the receiver from his ear. He stared at it, and then he put it back again; stood speechless, choked-up for a moment by the surging tide of his emotions, shaking his head over and over and over.

"Frank..." He found his voice at last. "You're supposed to rattle before you fang a guy."

"I'm sorry as hell, keed. I was just trying to help."

"Help?" Mitch could have slugged him. "Help how? By kicking a woman around? Doing something that the first hairy-assed caveman could have done ten times better? What the hell are you, a man or a mule, and don't tell me!"

"Gee," Downing said humbly. "A promotion already. I used to be a snake."

"Goddammit, Frank... !" Mitch was almost shouting. Where do you get off at pulling this on me? You knew I didn't want this muscle bit! You know I've always steered clear of it! I've got a head, by God, and I believe in using it, and if you'd just left me the hell alone, let me handle my own problems in my own way instead of acting like a goddam public nurse—!

"Mitch," Downing pleaded, "come over and shoot me, huh? Anytime. You don't need an appointment."

"I think I'll wait for a spear," Mitch said bitterly. "With a guy like you around, we should be back using them in another week."

He slammed up the phone.

He banged out of the booth, took a few angry strides away from it, and then, of course, he went right back to it again, and got the gambler back on the wire. Because Downing "had" tried to help, he "had" apologized, and after that, well, what could you do but accept it? Then, too, there was just a chance that—

"Sorry I blew my top, Frank. Now about Frankie and Johnnie—do you suppose there's a chance that they didn't make the send stick with Teddy?"

"No," Downing said, regretfully but firmly. "Those kids do a job like di wah didy. She'd have sprouted a trolly and made like a streetcar if they'd told her to."

"Goddam," Mitch sighed. "Why couldn't they just have kept the dough for themselves?"

"Well, that would have been stealing," Downing pointed out reasonably. "Anyway, they knew I'd find out about it."

"Yeah. Yeah, sure."

"It ain't all bad, is it, keed? You'll get your divorce, and you'll never see that broad again. That's a little something, anyway."

Mitch admitted that it was, and it didn't make a damned bit of difference because he'd lost Red. He was as sure of that as he was that yesterday wasn't today. Downing said that maybe he was low-rating Red a little; she was yar about him, so maybe she'd forget and forgive like the sweet kid she was. Mitch said maybe, and maybe yesterday was today after all. And on that unhappy note the conversation ended.

The plane seemed hardly out of the Dallas airport before it was in the Houston landing pattern. Mitch fastened his seat belt, probing the hopeless darkness of his problem.

Red was apparently not quite through with him yet. Otherwise she would have told him off over the phone. She meant to get through with him in person, which meant that... ?

Her voice came to him out of the past, back from the beginning and up through the years. "Don't you lie to me. Don't you ever, ever lie to me!" He remembered her attitude about the money, when she thought he had lied about the deposit-box cache; her dead coldness, her refusal to be swayed or persuaded. He remembered her fury over nominal trifles, because he had spoken to her sharply or thoughtlessly; frightening fits of anger which might hang on for a day or more and in which she was hardly responsible for what she did.

He had told her a thousand lies, one piling on top of the other as he sought to cover them up. He had made her a thousand promises, knowing quite well that there was hardly a chance in the world that he'd be able to keep them. He.

"Well, all right, then. As long as you're not married, why, then it's just the same as if we were. I don't need to
feel ashamed and—But it better be the truth, you hear? If you lied to me—!"

He got off the plane and went up the ramp. As he came out into the waiting room, he heard himself being paged over the public address system. He stopped dead still, then moved toward the information desk, a sick dread welling in his heart.

The message was from Red. A perfectly innocent one. Miss Corley was waiting for him in the parking area.

Mitch collected his baggage and went out to her.

She was standing at the side of the car. She was wearing a black semi-formal gown, short and low cut. Her gloves were long and white, and a white mink stole draped her shoulders, and she carried a small mesh evening bag.

He stopped a couple of steps short of her. Not knowing quite what to say, noting her strained taut expression.

Then, he made a tentative motion of taking her in his arms.

"Don't!" She stepped back quickly. "I—I mean you'll muss me up!"

"Red," he said. "Let me explain, will you? I—"

"No." Her head jerked nervously. "There's nothing to— We don't have time to talk now."

"Because of Zearsdale, you mean? But we can't go to a party with things like this!"

"Well, we are going! We promised to go, and we will. If a person doesn't keep his promises, he—he—" She broke off, turning away from him. "Let's get this over with, Mitch."

She opened the door of the car and climbed in, the dress riding high on her legs. Mitch put his baggage in the trunk, and slid behind the wheel. He didn't know what the right way of handling this was—if there was a right way—but he knew that what he was doing was all wrong. He should be leading, instead of following her lead. He should not, for God's sake, be taking her to a party at a time when she was about to cloud up and rain all over him.

He saw the small mesh bag in her lap, and started to reach for it. She snatched it away.

"Don't! Don't you touch that!"

"But—But I was just going to put it in my pocket for you."

"I don't want you to! I want to carry it myself!"

"I see," he said. And he did see. That much anyway.

He knew why she wanted to keep possession of the bag.

He started the car. He guided it out of the parking lot and drove swiftly toward Zearsdale's house. Neither of them spoke. Red seemed on the point of it, a time or two; he could sense the occasional glances which she stole in his direction, hear the hesitancy in breathing which precedes speech. But he couldn't and wouldn't help her out any, now that he knew what he did. So she also remained silent.

He turned into the driveway of the oil man's home, feeling very dead inside, and deeply puzzled, although he no longer gave a particular damn about anything.

Why was she doing this? What kind of sense did it make to go to a party when she was planning a thing like that? He parked the car, and helped her out. They went up the steps together, Red keeping a little away from him. Her lips were set in a nervous little smile. The color was high in her cheeks.

Zearsdale himself answered the door, as he had the night of Mitch's visit. Chatting amiably, he guided them into a small reception room and offered drinks. Red shook her head, a slight frown on her face.

"Not now, thank you. Are we the first ones here?"

"First?" said Zearsdale.

"Your first guests," said Mitch, and he too was frowning a little. "There doesn't seem to be anyone else here."

Zearsdale said casually that there were others around. "It's a big house, you know. How about you? Drink?"

"No, thanks. We'll have one with the others, if you don't mind."

"Better have something," Zearsdale said, and then as Mitch again declined firmly, "Well, come along then. Got some pictures I want to show you."

Somehow, he got himself between them as they left the room. He was still between them when they entered another, somewhat larger than the first. A motion picture screen hung from a stand about halfway down the room. Near the door they had entered stood a heavy 16-mm projector.
"Now, you sit down there, Corley. That's right, over there!" Zearsdale pointed. "And you, miss—may I call you Red?—you sit over here, Miss Red. The others have already seen these pictures, so—Sit down, Corley!"

"No," said Mitch. "No, I am not sitting down, Zearsdale. I'm walking out of here, and Red is coming with me, and don't try to stop us."

The room went silent. Zearsdale's expression froze between joviality and anger, and for a moment he looked pudgily foolish as he tried to adjust to the situation. Mitch silently cursed himself.

The mirrored ceiling above the crap table—the sudden clatter from the room above as he and Zearsdale had gambled. And then today, the way Zearsdale had thrown his weight around with Gidge Lord. Using the muscle of all his millions to make sure that he, Mitch, attended this "party."

How could he have missed it, for God's sake? How could he have led Red into the trap?

Red. He looked at her, so small and helpless, almost lost in the huge lounging chair. He looked at her, and her unreasoning anger—the deadly evidence of her intentions—was wiped away. And nothing mattered but getting her out of here safely.

He smiled at her, spoke with firm reassurance. "Don't be afraid, honey. We'll leave now."

She smiled back at him tremulously. Started to rise. Zearsdale's heavy hand came down on her shoulder, shoving her back in the chair.

"She stays," he said. "You're both staying."

"Zearsdale"—Mitch moved toward him. "You are so wrong."

Zearsdale stood where he was. Red let out a little scream—a warning. Mitch started to wheel, and a fist exploded against the back of his neck and a kidney punch blazed fire through his body. And then he was yanked backwards, slammed down into a chair with spine-rattling force.
Three men stood over him. Young wiry types, preening in their toughness. Smelling faintly of pool-chalk and bowl-and-pitcher bathing. If you knew anyone who knew anyone who knew anyone, you could pick them up for a couple of bills each. But you had to catch them fast, for the man with the scythe was already reaching for them.

One of them, at least one out of three, was destined for the death cell. The lad with the tiny head and the close-set eyes was a likely candidate. The second youth? Well, to him who passeth it out, shall be returned a hundred fold. So beat his head in—he never used it, anyway—and leave him in some dark alley with his brains spread out around him. As for the third young man (call him Pretty Boy), here surely is a victim of five-dollar sinning, for he will never spend five dollars to visit a doctor. So he also, in a different way, is a sure prospect for brain damage. Come in a little closer, look a brief distance into the future, and observe. Note the lowered trousers, the reddish stains on his shorts. Note the hard-rubber dosing gun, filled with that ol’ reliable remedy. (See our ads in your neighborhood toilet.) Note the downward thrust of the plunger, the shrill suddenly stifled scream as the stuff hits his cerebrum. That liverish-looking object that plopped to the floor is his tongue. Must these kids “always” bite their tongues in two! Well, half a tongue is better than none, right? Ha, ha. Anyway, why does a guy need a tongue when he’s drowning in his own blood?

Zearsdale gestured and the three fell back behind Mitch; poised, ready to pounce at another gesture. Red was recovering fast from her fear, and her eyes were icy as the oil man gave her a smile of apology.

"I'm sorry if I was a little rough a moment ago, Miss Red. These movies I was about to show, well, I thought you should see them. But if you'd really rather not—"

"She would rather not," Mitch said. "They're pictures of the dice game our host and I had the other night, Red. I think he feels there was something wrong with the game."

"Does he now?" Red said. "And just what does he think he's going to do about it?"

Zearsdale obviously didn't like her tone. But with what was patently an effort, he managed a fatherly smile. "I understand your feelings. You're far more a victim of this man than I am. I know, of course, that you're not his sister."

"So you know I'm not his sister," Red said. "What about it?"

"Child, child..." He shook his head gravely. "He's led you to believe that he's going to marry you, hasn't he? He's promised to marry you. But what you don't know is that he's already married. I've gone to a great deal of trouble to find out about this man, and—"

"Why?"

"Why? Well, I, uh—"

"Why?" Red repeated. "Who asked you to? What business is it of yours? Who do you think you are, anyway?"

"He thinks he's God," Mitch said. "He told me so himself."

Zearsdale flushed angrily. He said they would do well to shut up, and Red told him to shut up himself.

"I mean it, doggone you! I know Mitch is married and I know he's getting unmarried, and as soon as he does he's marrying me. Oh, yes, you are, darling!" She gave him a dazzling smile. "I was angry enough to kill you when I found out. I went out to the airport tonight, swearing that I was going to kill you. But your plane was late, and I began to get frightened and worried about you, and—and—"

She turned back to Zearsdale, eyes sparkling with tears.

"Don't you tell me anything about Mitch! He didn't know he was married when he met me. When he found out, he couldn't tell me, because I would have been hurt and he loved me and wanted to protect me, and—an’—Never mind. NNever mind. It's n-none of your business, you big ape!"

She broke off sniffling. Mitch swallowed lumpily, and for a moment he would have given both of his arms just to have them around her. Now, everything fell into place, and he knew why she had been so strained and awkward with him, why she had wanted to be around others for a while before facing him alone. The crisis in their relationship had given her a new and mature insight, and she had needed time to adjust to the unexpected depths she had found within herself. Also, doubtless, she had wanted to dispose of—

"I'm afraid I was mistaken about you," Zearsdale frowned at her. "You seem to be just about as bad as Corley is."
"Oh, shut up! You just hush," said Red.

"Yes, just as bad," Zearsdale nodded grimly. "So you'll have to suffer as he—Stop that, Corley! Don't snap your fingers when I'm talking!"

"I need a light." Mitch held up a cigarette. "Tell one of your apostles to give me one."

Zearsdale motioned curtly, and one of the mugs thrust a light at Mitch.

Mitch grabbed his wrist, yanked him forward, then swung him backward, simultaneously kicking over his chair as he lunged to his feet.

The thrown guy and another went down in a tangle. The third came in swinging. Mitch ducked inside the flailing arms, brought his head up sharply. There was a messy crunching sound and the guy's chin almost met his nose, and he went down to the floor in a heap. But now the other two were up, were weaving in with blood in their eyes. Mitch sprang squarely between them, his arms outflung.

Their arms whipped around their necks. Locked. Contracted. Their heads smashed together and they wobbled dazedly, then suddenly sat down as he kicked their legs from under them.

"'Mitch!' Take it, honey..." Red was holding a small gun out to him, the gun she had "thought" she was going to shoot him with.

Mitch took it, and swung coldly on Zearsdale. "All right," he snapped. "You claim I cheated you. No ifs, ands and buts about it, I rooked you, so you get these punks out here to give Red and me a hard time. Now I want to know just why you think you were cheated."

The oil man was staring at the three beaten hoods. He turned to Mitch, a curious expression in his deep-set eyes.

"Where did you learn to fight like that, Corley? I thought I was the only person who knew how."

"In hotel locker-rooms mostly. I used to be a bellboy."

"That's very interesting. I'll bet you were a very good bellboy, weren't you?"

Mitch began to get angry all over again. Three minutes ago, this character was going to have him worked over and now he wanted to make conversation.

"Let's stick to the subject," he said, curtly. "You say I'm a cheat. I say I win because I'm good, because I go into a game with a big edge; an edge I've gotten through training and experience. Any man who wants to be in the big time has to have one. You have, obviously. When was the last time you went into a business deal without a better than even chance of winning?"

"What?" Zearsdale's eyes had strayed to the hoodlums again. "Oh, come now, Corley. You're a professional gambler. You can make the dice do anything you want them to."

"Can I? Can I always do it? Then why is it that you broke me the night we played?"

"Well—But you came out winner."

"But you broke me," Mitch insisted. "You took me right down the line, and I was all ready to tell you good night and leave. That's what I meant to do, what I've done many times before when I went broke. But you wouldn't have it that way. You forced a loan on me to keep the game going. Well, isn't that right or not? You won and you have no one to blame but yourself for not staying winner."

"Well." Zearsdale wet his lips hesitantly. "That was purely a come-on. You lost deliberately."

"Oh, for God's sake! I was doing my damnedest to win, and those movies must have shown that I was! Why would I deliberately throw to you, anyway? To get you in another game? How do I know I can do it? What's the percentage in it? Why not take you in the game that I have?"

He waited, frowning. Zearsdale shrugged.

"Whatever you say. I'm hardly in a position to argue about it."

"Why not?" Mitch looked down at the gun. "You mean because of this? Well, we'll fix that right now." He walked over to the oil man, slapped the gun into his hand and stepped back. "Now, argue all you damned please. Or do you want these punks to sit on me before you begin?"

Zearsdale looked a little stunned. He hesitated, then nodded to the three. "All right, I won't need you anymore." They sidled out the door, keeping a wary eye on Mitch, and he shook his head bemusedly.

"Corley... Mr. Corley, I— I hardly know what to say. I seldom make a mistake about a man, but—"
"If you don't know what to say, maybe you'd better not say anything," Mitch told him. "Maybe if you just listen to me, you might learn something."

"Maybe I will," Zearsdale nodded. "Why don't we see?"

"All right," Mitch said. "You asked me if I was a good bellboy. The truth is that I was lousy. I was like a lot of young men you see, wanting a lot but not willing to do much to get it. That's why I took up dice, I suppose. Because it looked like an easy way of making out big. I kept on playing with them, always thinking it would suddenly get easy. And by the time I found out that there was no easy way of being good at anything, it was too late to stop."

But simply being good with the dice wasn't enough, of course. Not if you wanted to move into the upper brackets. You had to be well-informed, well-read, polished. You had to acquire an outlook on life, a certain way of dealing with people—an indefinable thing called class, which could never be imitated. So he had accomplished all that, and in accomplishing it, he had become far more than the very best man in the country with a pair of dice.

"The trouble with you, Zearsdale, is that you've forgotten how good a man can get through nothing but his own efforts. If he's good, as good as I am, then he can't be for real. If he beats you, he's got to be cheating. Well, I'm a ringer, yes, but I'm the straightest player you'll ever come up against. I'm no more a cheat than the baseball pitcher who throws nine strikes out of ten. Or the sharpshooter who keeps ringing up bullseyes. And I'm good at a lot of things besides dice. I'll take you on for a question-and-answers game on any subject you name. I'll take you on at poker—with you dealing all the cards. I'll take you on at golf—and let you pick my clubs. I'll take you on at anything from matches to marbles, Zearsdale, and I'll beat the ever-lovin' socks off of you, because it's been so damned long since you met a good man you're ready to lie down and holler foul before you ever begin!"

Red clapped her hands enthusiastically. Zearsdale sat scowling, squirming a little. He wasn't used to being talked to like that. He certainly didn't have to take it. He liked a man with pride, of course. God, how he loved a man with pride and the guts to stand up and speak his mind! But—

His broad mouth twisted into a reluctant grin. Then he threw back his head and laughed, and he laughed until the tears came to his eyes. At last, after a vigorous blowing of his nose, he got control of himself.

"Corley, I wouldn't have missed this for the world! I honestly wouldn't. I—" He suddenly became aware of the gun he was holding. "My God, what am I doing with this? Let me give it back to you."

"Keep it," Mitch said. "Red and I don't have any need for guns."

"Neither do I," Zearsdale said. "I'll get rid of it for us."

He excused himself and left the room. He returned without the gun, wheeling a small portable bar in front of him.

"I think we all need a drink," he declared roundly. "Or maybe two, who knows? What would you like, Miss, uh, Red?"

"Nothing," said Red, looking very stern. "Not until you say you're sorry."

"Of course. I'm sorry."

"With sugar on it," Red insisted. "That's what you have to say when you're really and truly sorry."

Zearsdale squirmed, glanced appealingly at Mitch. Mitch told him he might as well give in and say it. Red would persist until he did. So the oil man said very rapidly that he was sorry with sugar on it.

"Well, all right, then," Red said, and she gave him one of her very best smiles, a smile that reached right inside of him and patted him on the heart. "I guess you're really not so bad when a person gets to know you."

"Who is?" said Mitch.

"Hear, hear," said Zearsdale.

And then they all had a drink together.

Or maybe two, who knows... ?

The End
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