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by
Arnie Katz

Chapter One

Marty Benton, known in more exciting times in his colorful past as Mario "Bentnose" Bentolucci, permitted himself a sigh of satisfaction as he looked out at the crowded casino. The players couldn't see him behind the one-way glass, but his eagle eyes could pick out the hands on the poker tables with the minor assistance of the mother-of-pearl opera glasses he habitually carried for this purpose.

It wasn't easy to make money in 1952, with the Korean War still a too-recent memory, but the Mojave Beacon Resort Hotel and Casino was doing it. Now.

Those horrendous losing nights six months ago when the big hotel opened down Las Vegas Boulevard from the Fabulous Flamingo were just a bad memory. Everything that could have gone wrong, did so. Too many bust-out nights had nearly shut the glass and gilt doors as fast as they'd opened.

Another couple of good months, Marty told himself as he scanned the crowded tables and jammed slot machines aisles. Another couple of good months and the Beacon would be solidly in the black, a fixture on the emerging strip of hotels that was making Las Vegas a fast-growing pleasure stop.

His boss, Guiseppe Scallopini, would be pleased. If things went well. If the Mojave Beacon raked in the cash thrown onto its tables with such abandon by the legion of gamblers whose cries of triumph and fury filled the air of the high-ceilinged, windowless casino.

It was his job to make sure nothing unfortunate happened to the Mojave Beacon. That's what paid for his silk shirts, the closet full of double breasted suits, and the penthouse full of double breasted women.

It was a good life, out here in Vegas. There wasn't much Marty wouldn't do to keep it. He'd even stoop to legality if necessary to protect the resort and, with it, his prestigious job.

That's why he'd hired Monique LaFleur (née Monica Flowers of Padukah, KY). She might not be French, but the 6-ft.-tall brunette was certainly a towering eiffel. He'd given her a job the night the dwarf transvestite made seventeen straight passes to break the bank for the 10th time that month and then threw up on the the craps table. Monique claimed psychic abilities, and he was not taking any chances.

A lot of guys saw his built-like-a-brick-shithouse assistant and made cracks about his edifice complex. As sexy as she was, Monique's mental powers appealed to him more strongly than her amorous abilities. Definitely a case of mind over mattress.

A tug at his sleeve announced the arrival of Monquie LaFleur. No sense letting her wrinkle the suit, he thought, so he patted her hand, made one last observation of a troublesome craps layout, and turned to his assistant.

"I feel a Presence," she announced.

"What kinda presence?"

"Someone who just came into the casino is very lucky."

"So? I love lucky guys," Marty snorted. "Lotta guys think they're lucky... until they put their dough on the line." Las Vegas hotels are built on a foundation of guys who took their luck for granite.

"This man is lucky," Monique countered. "Lucky beyond the normal."

"Yeah?"

"He has the Luck of the Irish."

"Zat bad?"

"Only if he plays in your casino," Monique replied with a faint smile.

"Which guy?" Marty demanded. "Which guy is this?" His job security couldn't stand another broken bank.

"I only sense the aura of his good fortune," Monique explained. "You'll have to take me down there so I can finger him for you."

"Well, let's get going before he gets rolling." They headed for the main gaming salon.

* *

"Everything is going according to your wishes, Don Scallopini," said Anthony Callomari. The cool study, paneled in dark wood, denied the heat of an early September Vegas night and the stinking desert that waited just beyond the last neon sign on the strip.

Don Giuseppe Scallopini was pleased, but he was also wary. He had not attained his current position without constant vigilance. He was not about to let down his guard now. "And what of the Mojave Beacon?"

"It's okay now, Don Scallopini."

"That is good," said the paunchy man behind the huge expanse of mahogany desk. "I must tell you, Antonio, that for a number of months I was deeply troubled by this operation."

"It was pretty bad," Antonio agreed quickly. He tried to look respectful and earnest as he sought for the sliver of an opening through which he could knife his boss, Marty Benton, in the back.

"I was beginning to fear that Marty was an unlucky man," said the Don. "It is not good to have such a man in control of a casino."

"Yes, he was very unlucky," Antonio said, leaping at the chance. They didn't call him "Tony Guts" for nothing. Actually, they called him Tony Guts because of his penchant for eating toasted rye bagels with chopped liver, he still had to live up to the spirit of the nickname, whatever its origin.

"The underage players, the riot in the horse room," Don Scallopini let the awful images of the Mojave Beacon's opening season flood in upon him. "Many unlucky things. I had almost decided that Marty was the Beacon's Albatross."

Antonio didn't know this Albert Ross guy, but Marty being like him couldn't be good news -- for Marty. Antonio had never even seen Ross around town; maybe the guy screwed up so bad they took him out to the desert for a hike to nowhere. "Is there something you wish me to do, Don Scallopini?"

"As you have said, all is now as it should be," the crimelord answered. "But I want you to hang around at the Mojave and watch the business. In that way, you will be able to tell your Don if something goes wrong."

"Yes, Don Scallopini." He bowed his head slightly. The Don extended his ring in the familiar ritual.

Antonio "Tony Guts" Callomari would watch the Mojave like a hawk. If anything happened, Bentnose's ass was grass. And if nothing happened on its own, maybe he could figure out a way to help it along.

* *

"I tell you, Dino, this guy is one cool cat." Frank savored the last three words, pronouncing each slowly and distinctly as if periods separated them.

"So how'd you happen to meet this old Irish boy?" Dean asked between sips of his current martini. The only thing Dean knew for certain about Ireland was that they had a ton of potatoes. The only thing he knew about potatoes was that you make vodka out of them. For a second, he wondered

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A Fan Novel

by

Arnie Katz

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why the Russkies had beaten the Irish to the vodka business. Or maybe there *was* Irish vodka. He'd have to check.

"You know how it is on the road, Dino," Frank said. "I always got time on my hands. Time between shows, time in the afternoon. Time in the limo. A lotta time to kill. That's a real drag for a cat like me."

"That's why they invented doubles," Dean replied. He hoped Frank would finish his story soon. It was already seven o'clock, and he could still see the hands of his watch without closing one eye. He decided to take his own advice and began to mix a double.

"There only so much you can drink," Frank said. He saw the desolated expression on his buddy's face. He didn't want to hurt Dean's feelings "No, Dino-baby, I don't mean you. You could drink the Seagram's Building dry. I meant the rest of the world."

"What about the dollies?"

"Sometimes, they can give you a lift," Frank admitted. "But, Dino, when I'm banging some broad inna dressing room, sometimes I can't even remember her name. I don't even want to remember it."

"Remembering my own name is enough for me, Frank." Not a bad line, Dean thought. A little funny, a little humble. Maybe he should tell the writers to put it in the act.

"So I tried all kinds of groovy tings to keep busy. I tried writin' a book. I tried painting pictures. I even tried knittin' like Sammy." He pursed his lips and vibrated them in the ancient gesture known as a raspberry. "I was goin' nuts, chairman of the bored."

"So who is this young man, a singer?" Dean didn't really think the Rat Pack needed another singer, but Frank was the leader.

"No, he's more like a comedian," Frank said.

"Naw, naw, Frankie," Dean said with genuine anguish. "Jerry is just about as much as a man like me can handle" He didn't need to elaborate. His love-hate relationship with his long-time partner, a manic slapstick specialist, was common knowledge.

"No, he's a writer," said Frank. "Like Walter Winchell, only funnier."

"You mean like Earl Wilson?" Dean always read the columns. "Geez, Frank, you're kissing up to a gossip guy? He's gonna blow the whistle on you and..."

"He's not dat kind of writer, Dino. This man is a class act. The cat is a true artist." Frank leaned forward, lifted the little green magazine, and waved it for emphasis. "This is it, Dino."

Dino looked at it closely. "You mean this Hyphen Hyphen thing has a story about this guy?"

"Just one *Hyphen*, Dino," Frank corrected. "You forgot to close one eye."

"No, this is his ting. Well, half of it's his, anyway," Frank explained. "He writes stories and then he prints them on his press. Except that he does not use a press. He's got a whatchacallit mimeogrope."

"So, you flipped through this Hyphen, and there was a

story about you..."

"Nothin' about me. Nothing about you, either, Dino," Frank corrected. "This is strictly for the In Crowd. Even I don't understand everyting, so you know it has to be the hippest of the hip."

"So?"

"Let me tell my fuckin' story, Dean," Frank said. "So I was inna cab, riding over to the Desert Inn to catch Joey's late show, and there was dis little green magazine in the back seat."

"He sent it to some guy named 'Lee'. He musta left it behind."

"And this is the mag right here?"

"No, this is just the latest one. I read that first one, and I wanted to get more. You can't find the damn thing on any newsstand. I had guys look."

"I dint wanna use my real name. This is a sensitive man, and I dint wanna shake him up, a star like me. So I made up a dipshit name, and got a box in a hole-inna-wall post office back in Joisey. I got a cousin dere, he picks up the mail and ships it out here."

"So now he's here in Vegas to see you?"

"I told you, Dino, this individual does not even know me. He's here on a special trip. A bunch of his fans chipped in fer it. He's just passing true."

"Then what the big problem, Frank?"

"Dis is my town. I want him to have a night that will live in his memory. Maybe even something he could write about inna *Hyphen*."

"I know a couple of very convivial ladies who could be at his hotel room in less than 15 minutes at your command, mon capitan," said Dean. He already had his Las Vegas address book in hand and was thumbing the pages to find this pair of lovelies.

"That is not what I meant, Dino, but I thank you for the thought," Frank said. "This is a real real married guy, plus which he don't even have a room. No, I just wanna make sure he has a good time -- maybe get him a jackpot of somethin'. And I would like to see this wonderful human being win it. I wanna see the expression on his face when dose beautiful coins pour out."

"Do you know where he is?" Dino said. "We better get over there."

"Dat is a good taught, Dino. Dat is the kind of tinkin' that makes America, my country, a stand-up place to live. One of my guys saw him at da Nugget. We'll start dere."

"Just let me finish this little ole one for the road, Frank," Dean said, suiting action to words. "And we are on our way."

* *

"We can break the whole ring," Agent John Petrie said to his partner, Sam Carruthers. "Now we know how they're passing the Area 51 material. We'll be the Director's fair haired boys."

To be completely factual, both of them were already fair haired, not to mention clean shaven and spartan livers in line

with J. Edgar Hoover's idea of All-American manhood. On the other hand, only Petrie was still youthful enough to merit the appellation "boy". Carruthers had been a booze-buster in the 1930s.

"We've had one dead end after another," Carruthers said, barely looking up from the sheaf of reports in front of him.

"There's always going to be unproductive lines of investigation," Agent Petrie insisted.

"You mean like the week we spent at Oxford because one of your Unimpeachable Sources told us the lord of the ring was that Professor Tolkein guy," Carruthers replied. "You know how many lectures I had to sit through? You know how dull he was?"

"This is really different," said Petrie, unwilling to give up what he knew to be the turning point in the case. The communist spy ring was in his grasp, if he could convince his perpetually pessimistic partner. "This is the break we've needed, Sam. We've got those Russkie spies cold."

"Well, let's hear it, John."

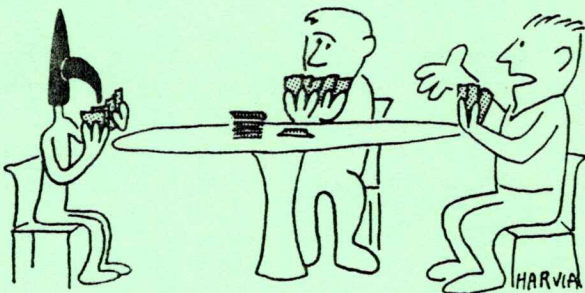
"You know we've been trying to stop the security breach at Area 51," Agent Petrie began. He quickly lapsed into the measured tones required of an FBI agent giving a briefing. "My informant says they pass the information on a microdot. The delivery is made once a month – and tonight's the night."

"The leader of the network puts the information on a microdot and attaches it to a quarter. The courier – usually an old woman, a cripple, or a foreign national – puts the coin in a designated slot machine and pulls the handle. A guy dressed as a repairman comes out of nowhere, shuts down the machine, opens it up, and pulls the quarter. It's always a 1947, to make it easy to spot among all the new ones the change booths give out."

"And the repair man goes where?"

"That's what we don't know, but we're going to find out," Petrie promised. "I've got spotters at every place downtown."

The phone rang. Petrie yanked the receiver to his ear.



Can you believe the poker face on that guy?

Carruthers saw him nod vigorously a few times, and then hang up with a terse "thanks".

"They think they've spotted him leaving the Golden Nugget, heading for the Mojave Beacon," Petrie announced. "He's an Irish guy with two American couples"

"Well, we'd better get going," Carruthers said as he lurched from his chair.

"And we're going to have quite a surprise for a certain Irish spy named Walter Alexander Willis."

* *

Steve Linneman took in the entire restaurant with one stealthy sidelong glance as he leaned forward to whisper in his friend's cauliflowered ear. No sense having someone overhear their business. "I tell you, this is the guy."

"How do you know that?" Tommy Smegmalian wanted to know. "How do you know he's the Irish Fixer?"

"I overheard him and his friends talking," Steve said. "I could tell he was Irish from his thick brogue."

"You could tell that just from his shoes?" Tommy said with greater-than-usual respect. A lot of people said Tommy looked like New York Yankee catcher Yogi Berra. He took it as a compliment. Privately, he thought Yogi had him beat in the looks department. Privately, everyone else thought Yogi had him in the brains department, too.

"Well, anyway, I figured it was funny, this guy coming all the way here from Ireland. So I listened up, and all this guy talks about is the greyhounds. Well, you know me, Tommy, I'm always looking for an angle. I'm what they call 'acute'."

"Well, for a guy I guess you're not too bad," The ex-fighter said. "An' you do allus find the angle." Tommy was in awe of his friend. Steve did the thinking for both of them. So far, Tommy had no complaints.

"So I clocked the conversation," Steve continued, anxious to finish this explanation. This was always the hardest part with Tommy. He would run through a brick wall for Steve, and the weedy little gambler respected that. Unfortunately, Tommy would run through a brick wall even if there was an open door in the middle of it. "He started yakking about 'Why Bert' this and 'Why Bert' that."

"I figured it must be important, so you know what I did?" Steve held up a hand to suppress the answer to his rhetorical question. "I looked through the race form, and Why Bert? was a dog running in the sixths at 16-1."

"I put down a \$20 on the nose."

"So what happened?" Tommy's mental agility had suffered even more than his physical dexterity as a result of 106 fights (21-82-3).

"Why Bert? came home first and I picked up a cool \$316.75," Steve said. "I'd be rolling in it now if the track only had six races."

"I don't unnerstan'," said Tommy.

"I mean I lost it all betting on the next two races," Steve said, acknowledging the painful failure of his plan to pyramid the \$316.75 into big bucks. "Anyway, I figure that race was nothing."

Chapter Two

Walter A. Willis was feeling a bit frazzled. There was still so much to see, so many people he wanted to meet, during his once-in-a-lifetime trip to the United States, but even Fandom's Leading Expert and Critic wasn't immune to post-convention letdown.

The Chicon had been breathtaking in every sense of the word. It was by far the biggest worldcon in history, and the huge crowds had overwhelmed this ordinarily shy Belfaster. Even friendliness becomes a strain when a thousand people want to shake your hand and hear a sample of the brilliant wit that earned a trans-Atlantic trip.

The Chicon had given him some wonderful moments, but also some harrowing ones. Korshak's introduction of notables was agony, and he didn't think he'd ever get used to public speaking. He'd already decided to write a trip report, so everything of consequence, and a lot more besides, had gone into his notebook.

That didn't prevent him from replaying conversations and incidents. That Jim Webbert! Well, they'd finally dropped him off in Salt Lake City. He tried to look on the bright side. At least the big kid had provided the occasion for some funny lines.

Thank Ghu they'd struck oil before Rog Phillips become the desert's latest nuclear explosion. It eased tensions in the car immeasurably when the last in the seemingly unending succession of service station

attendants had proferred the right stuff. He wondered what he could have done in his report if Rog Phillips had had the massive stroke that seemed inevitable until they'd solved the car problem.

He didn't know any fans in Las Vegas, but it still looked pretty exciting. When Chuck heard that the little gambling town was on the itinerary, he'd begged the Irish half of the *Hyphen* editorial board not to squander his money on games of chance.

"You could invest in a good stock or bond," Harris had written just days before Walter's departure to America. "Put that dollar into Packard," Chuck counseled, "and it'll grow into millions. Or how about Ford Motor Company? They've got a secret new car that is bound to be a smash when it comes out in 1954. If they weren't sure, would they name it after Edsel Ford?"

The closest he'd gotten to an investment of this type was a particularly fine bottle of bonded Scotch someone had poured at one of the Chicon parties. He just couldn't see going to Las Vegas without checking if there was a fortune waiting for him in the casino.

He consulted his finances. Money was a bit tight, but he had a little he could risk. Four of those silver quarters ought to be enough to reap his just reward.

The Golden Nugget had the biggest sign on the block, a multi-story confection of rainbow neon. It drew them like

"Nuthin'?"

"The Irish Fixer's got to have more going than one lousy race," Steve pointed out.

"What I gotta do, Steve?" Tommy asked.

"You follow him, stay on his tail. Watch what he bets. Then all we got to do is put our money down the same way and clean up!" He looked at Tommy. "You know what I want you to do?"

"Follow him, see what he bets. Then we bet the same and win." Steve smiled, which made Tommy happy.

"So get going." Tommy Smegmalian headed for the casino.

* *

Arnie Katz, age six, idly wondered about the little blonde girl who lived next door. He did not know Walt Willis or Frank or even Marty Bentnose Bentolucci.

He sat in his room in his parents' Long Island home and thought large thoughts. Someday he would be a fan. For now, he has no part in this story.

* *

Harry Warner adjusted the Probe's trans-reality gauge with practiced ease. He set the spatial coordinates for Las Vegas, Nevada and locked in the arrival time.

*How Harry Warner came to be at the controls of the Probe is the subject for a soon-to-be forthcoming fan novel, *Warner Conquers Time*. Until then, you'll just have to take Your Author's word that this is All Right.

As he waited for the Probe to whisk him to the appointed destination, Harry recalled the mission briefing which he had received from Francis Towner Laney subjective minutes earlier. As with the three others that had preceded it, Laney had imparted the information in a rapid-fire jabber designed to eat up the smallest possible portion of the 60 objective minutes that represented the potential span of Harry Warner's career as an intrepid adventurer.

"His name won't mean anything to you," Francis Towner Laney had begun, "but he is fandom's all-time number one fan face.

"Or rather he was until the League manipulated things to give him a windfall fortune. As a millionaire philanthropist, he didn't have time for fan activity, and he drifted away with articles unwritten and fanzines unpublished."

"And my mission?"

"We're sending you to Las Vegas on the very night he won his first million. You've got to prevent that, and save him for fandom."

As the lights of downtown Vegas materialized outside the Probe, Harry vowed that his fourth mission would end successfully, just like the first three.

He would restore Walt Willis to fanhistory!



Art Credits

Ross Chamberlain: 5

Teddy Harvia: 4

Jat Kinney: 9

Bill Kunkel: 10

ATom: 13

moths to the flame, and he was quickly singed to the tune of three quarters with no return.

Forry, Wendayne, Rog and Mari were preoccupied and scarcely noticed when he slipped out of the Golden Nugget and looked up and down Fremont Street.

Then he saw the sign: Mojave Beacon. He thought of the lighthouse on the *Hyphen* bacover and decided to take it as a omen.

• *

"That's him," said Monique, pointing at a somewhat bewildered looking fellow standing just inside the main casino door.

"You mean the guy with the quarter clutched in his hand?" Marty asked. She nodded. "He's gonna break us with a quarter? Will I still be alive when it happens?"

"The question is how long you'll still be alive after it happens," said Monique. She didn't like anyone, even Marty, casting aspersions on her ability. "With the Luck of the Irish, anything is possible."

Marty thought of his and everybody else's boss, Don Scalopini. Job and life termination sometimes arrived simultaneously in Las Vegas. He'd hate to check out just when things were looking so good. Besides, he wanted to be there when those Brooklyn Bums put it to the Yankees in the Series next month. He'd already gotten five g's down on the Dodgers at 4 to 1 with Jimmy the Weasel, and dead men can't collect a payoff.

Marty raised his hand in the air. His finger traced an imaginary circle in the smoke of a thousand cigarettes and cigars. He'd barely dropped it back to his side when Tony Martinelli broke through the milling onlookers.

"Yes, Mr. Benton?" Tony said. He always called the casino manager Mr. Benton in public areas of the Mojave Beacon. It was a sign of respect, one he planned to require of underlings when he became Casino Manager.

"That guy," Marty said, leaning close to his assistant's ear so that no one would overhear. "Monique says he might be trouble. Steer him to the bust-out aisle."

"He some kinda high roller?" Tony asked. Was this his chance? That's what he *really* wanted to know.

"Naw, I don't think so. Looks like his bankroll is maybe that one quarter in his hand." He shrugged. "Moniqua's got one of her hunches," he whispered. "I don't wanna take no chances."

"You got it," said Tony, nodding vigorously several times. "It's covered, Mr. Benton."

"Good boy," Marty said. He took Monique by the arm. "We might as well split." The couple strode off. Tony could not believe his luck.

Tony quickly walked to a position at the intersection of two walkways between the banks of slot machines, maybe 50 feet in front of the guy. He tried to look menacing. It didn't take much effort.

* *

Tommy Smegmalian had been following the Irish Fixer since he caught up with him in the Golden Nugget. All he

was doing was walking around. At first, Tommy thought maybe he got the wrong guy, and he'd been really worried about what Steve would say about *that*. Tommy wasn't afraid of anything or anyone, not physically, but his friend's cutting tongue and disapproving look could reduce him practically to tears.

But he kept at it, mostly because he couldn't figure what else to do. And it had turned out okay. The Fixer was just casing the joints, getting the feel of the action. That was the mark of the pro. The way he studied each one-armed bandit, only to pass each one by unplayed, This guy knows, Tommy kept telling himself as he followed his quarry up and down rows, this guy knows.

* *

Agent Petrie, wearing a Hawaiian shirt of the type favored by tourists, tried to blend into the casino hubbub. Sitting at a slot machine, he fed just enough nickels into the slot to keep from looking suspicious, though he was going to have to break another sawbuck if the damn thing didn't pay off soon.

Between lusty pulls at the big handle, he looked through the small space that separated his machine from its twin to the right. He might have missed the courier altogether if he hadn't noticed the two casino wiseguys staring at the guy so pointedly.

Actually, and Petrie almost hated to admit this even to himself, he wouldn't have given the two hard guys a second look if one of them hadn't been with a stacked brunette whose breasts seemed to bubble out of the top of her black sequined dress like hot milk.

The Director didn't approve of sex on the job. Or off the job, come to that. Well, he just wouldn't put that in his report.

The brunette and one of the men walked away, so he turned his attention to the guy clutching the quarter. This had to be it. He wished Carruthers, the senior field agent and his mentor, was around, but Sam was down the street at the Four Queens. He would have to handle this one alone.

Petrie picked up his paper cup of nickels and edged down the aisle to get a better view of the action. If the courier made a move for a machine, he was going to be right behind him.

* *

Chuck looked at the note Vinç had just skimmed across the table to him. "What do you think Himself is doing now?"

"Throwing away a fortune in the stock market," Chuck wrote. He made a face. He bent over the next sheet on the pad. "Squandering the *Hyphen* sub money."

Vinç hated to see the mercurial Harris getting exercised about such a small matter. "Chuck, you've got to take the broad view in these things," he advised.

"If Walter takes the broad view, Madeleine will kill him when he gets home."

* *

"Dere he is, Dino," Frank said. "Dat is da cat."

"How come you didn't tell me this Willis boy is siamese twins?"

"Jeepers, creepers, you gotta close one a dem peepers, Dino," Frank reminded his sidekick. "Dere is one an only Walter A. Willis, an' dat is da one an only man."

Sure enough, when Dean looked again, there was only one guy wandering along clutching a quarter in his hand, Frank's guy didn't look like anyone special; he wasn't even wearing a charcoal grey suit.

"You didn't tell me your friend travels with a body guard," Dino replied. He wondered why this Willis needed a body guard. He didn't see anyone clamoring for his autograph.

"He don't, Dino."

"Then who is that big ole boy over there followin' behind him?"

"I dunno, Dino, but I doan like it," Frank said. "I doan tink dat guy is wit him." Did someone have it in for his fannish idol? Somebody was getting 'way out of line, and in his town, too.

After giving Willis one last look to make sure he wasn't in any immediate danger, Frank turned away from the casino floor and whispered something to the big man standing behind him. "Take dat sawed off bum outta da action, Rocky."

The mammoth heavyweight contender's huge shoulders parted the crowd like a knife going through a slab of philly at the breakfast table.

Rocky was happy to do a star like Frank a favor. Two weeks from now, he'd get into the ring with Jersey Joe Walcott, maybe win the title. Someday, he wanted to own a joint like Dempsey did and want him and his pals to dress up the place. Still, he wanted to avoid cracking Winchell's column by starting trouble in the middle of the Mojave Beacon Casino. That could hurt his rep. No one wanted to go to a restaurant owned by an ex-pug who got into public fights.

When he got closer, he saw it was Tommy Smegmalian, a middleweight catcher he'd seen around the gyms a couple of years back. His massive hands unclenched. This would be easier than he thought.

* *

Harry Warner didn't like crowds. They hadn't nicknamed him the Hagerstown Hermit for nothing. This place was like the bar at a worldcon; all it needed was a couple of half-drunk pros. Half-drunk science fiction writers, he amended, eying several gaudily dressed women standing around the dice tables. He hoped none of those women were fans; the publicity might embarrass fandom if they were arrested while plying their trade.

Not for the first time, he wished fans looked more like their publications. He'd be able to recognize a *Slant* or

Hyphen cover in an instant.

He sighed. Things were seldom so convenient. Maybe he could mention it in a letter of comment to someone.

Harry forced himself away from such musings. He had to find Willis -- and soon.

* *

Joyce Worley, the sweetheart of Poplar Bluff High, lay awake, going over and over the incidents of her first week in the ninth grade. She liked school. It had two of her favorite things, books and boys.

She definitely wanted plenty of both, she thought, as she floated into the deep sleep of the truly innocent.



Chapter Three

There certainly are slots of fruit machines, Walter thought as he continued to survey his options, and quite a few nuts to go with them. He felt very attached to the quarter, possibly because it was still sticky from the tape that had affixed it to the subscription request from that kid in Cleveland. What was his name? Henderson Ellis? No, Harlan Ellison. That was it. Well, it didn't matter. Chances were that no one would ever hear of him again, anyway.

The sight of the menacing man in the sharkskin suit a few paces ahead of him stopped the visiting BNF in his tracks. Dark eyes bored into him, and the tight-lipped expression on the man's face didn't stamp him as a well-wisher. Was that a bulge near the shoulder under the flashy coat? Walter surreptitiously checked to make sure his fly was closed and that his last meal wasn't sticking to his chin.

He considered squeezing past the man and decided against it. It wasn't that he was scared, but he certainly didn't want trouble. This fellow surely looked like he could supply it in ample quantities.

Going in some other direction suddenly looked like the best plan.

* *

The Fixer's sudden change of direction caught Tommy Smegmalian by surprise. He stopped in his tracks right in the middle of the row, less than 10 feet in front of the man whom he was supposed to follow without being noticed.

He froze, his lantern jaw hanging open as he stared eye to eye with the Irish Fixer. Terror filled him, making it impossible to work his legs. Either the guy would recognize him now, or he would remember him later. Either way, shadowing him any more was going to be one tough job.

Suddenly, Tommy felt a massive hand grip his shoulder. "Wha-wha-wha..." His mouth wasn't working so well, either.

"Hiya, Tommy," a booming voice said behind him. "Long time no see!" He couldn't make himself turn around and look.

He didn't have to. The big man spun him around like a top and gave him a bearhug. "R-r-rock?" Tommy said, looking up into the smiling face of the big young fighter. He knew this guy!

"How's it going, Tommy?" Rocky said as he released the smaller man. Tommy didn't look right. Rocky expected the pug to be a little surprised, coming up behind him like this, but that pop-eyed look was a little scary.

Maybe Smegmalian *had* taken too many shots to the melon. That's the way it was with catchers. All heart, but they caught every punch the other guy threw. He'd quit before he got that way. Yeah, retired before they punched it out of him.

"Let's go talk about old times, Tommy," Rocky said. The iron grip around his shoulders didn't give Tommy a lot of choice in the matter. He allowed himself to be meekly led in the direction of the bar.

Well, he thought as Rocky propelled him through the crowd, the Fixer was probably onto him anyway. This way, even Steve would see that he didn't have any choice. That wouldn't make him happy, but he would get over it. That was the good thing about Steve.

* *

Harry Warner sighed with relief. It hadn't been hard to find Willis after all.

The little harp pin on Walter's shirt had made a positive identification automatic. But tracking him down in the first place in this sea of neon sleaze was a considerable accomplishment.

He'd tried the Golden Nugget first, of course. Laney had told him to start there, though he wouldn't tell him why. It probably had something to do with the future and time paradoxes and all the other things which had so recently become facts of life for the erstwhile Hagerstown Hermit.

He'd spotted Forry Ackerman, whom he recognized from a photo in *The Immortal Storm*, but Willis hadn't been in evidence. That's when he noticed the Mojave Beacon across the way. He thought of the beacon on the back of every *Hyphen*, and he figured it was worth crossing the street.

Willis was wandering up and down the aisles, still clutching the fateful quarter. "There's still time," Harry assured himself. "He hasn't won it yet."

And he wouldn't, if Harry Warner Junior had any say in the matter. It was for the good of fandom.

* *

Marty didn't like what he saw in the glasses. What the hell was Tony trying to pull? The guy with the quarter had been walking right down the row toward the bust-out aisle. Those machines were harder to break than

a Vegas hooker's heart.

So why did Tony get in the guy's way? He didn't know, and he didn't like this one bit. "I gotta get down there," he said to Monique. He straightened his tie as he rushed through the door to the casino.

* *

Agent Petrie had to stop himself from calling out to Rocky when the big man strode into the same row as the Irish courier. He recognized him right off from the sports pages.

The number-one contender, right here almost close enough to touch! He was certain Rocky would beat that old man in Philadelphia at the end of the month, and he'd be the champ. Rocky had never lost, Petrie, a devoted fight fan, reminded himself. Walcott was all right in his day, but the 1950s belonged to the Rock.

He'd actually risen from his stool when he caught himself. He didn't think Carruthers, much less the Director, would consider an autograph a fair trade for an international spy ring. Petrie sat back down in front of his machine, though not without a little *sotto voce* grumbling.

Even when Rocky and the fireplug with the cauliflower ears disappeared in the general direction of the bar, Petrie was still mulling his disappoint. Well, maybe he'd catch Rocky coming out of there later and get his signature then. He could say it was for his kid. Yeah... his kid John. The Rock didn't have to know he wasn't married.

* *

"I see the Rock got that old boy right outa there, Frank," Dean commented.

"Yeah, he's a real class individual, Dino," Frank replied. "But who is that joker in the suit? I doan like da way he looks at Willis."

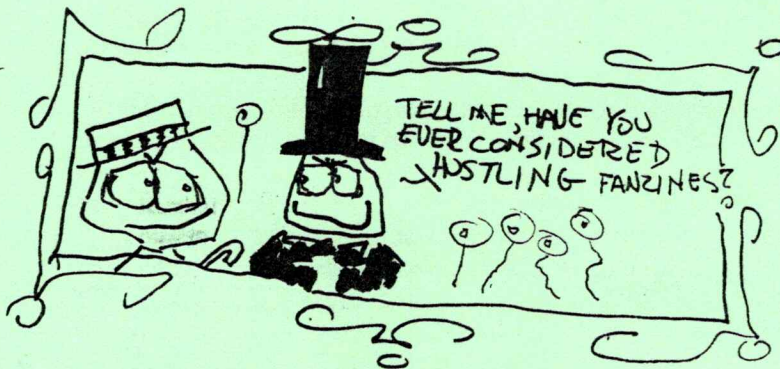
"He works for the Mojave, Frank," Dean replied. "Name of... Martini."

"Martini, like the drink?" Frank asked.

"Why thank you, Frankie, I believe I will have one"

"I mean da guy in da suit, Dino. His name?"

"No... Martinelli. That's it, Martinelli!" Dean said in a



momentary burst of clarity.

"You *know* dis guy?"

"Seen him around the place," Dean said. "Jerry and I gonna play here after we make that little ole 'Jumping Jacks' picture."

"Well, I doan like da way he looks at my boy dere," Frank said. "Dis Willis is a sensitive cat. He's an artiste, like me, so I unnerstan him. Could you go over dere and ged him away or something?"

"I could buy ole Tony a little drinky."

"Dat is a good taught, Dino. He's scaring da numero uno fan."

"Or a big drink." Dean smiled. This was sounding better.

"Yeah, dat's the idea."

"Or have him buy me a drink," Dino amended."

"Dat's the ticket, Dino," said Frank.. "So go over dere. Get dis Martinelli person away from dere."

"A big ole drink," said Dean, now caught up in the plan. "No umbrellas." He didn't like anything that took up space in a glass which could otherwise be devoted to good booze. Except olives. They were a necessity. Dean rose somewhat unsteadily and sauntered in the general direction of Tony Martinelli.

* *

He probably would have done as he'd promised if shouts, screams, and an all-too-familiar raucous laugh hadn't heralded the arrival of his partner Jerry.

"Oh, Dean," the little comedian bellowed as he ran through the crowd. "Oh, Dean!"

"Io there, little buddy o' mine," Dean said with an enthusiasm he didn't feel. They'd had another blow up after they wrapped the picture, and they hadn't talked in two weeks.

Jerry ran up to him and, as though nothing had happened, threw his arms around the tall singer and gave him a big smacky kiss right on the lips. "I love this man," Jerry bellowed. "This is my guy! The greatest!"

"I thought you weren't speaking to me, Jer," Dean said as he tried to extricate himself from the capering comedian's flailing hands.

For a second, Dean imagined some chicken trying to evade Jerry's advances. He couldn't help smiling at the antics which had already drawn a pretty good crowd around the two.

Jerry saw this and took it as a good sign. "I did a bad thing, Dean," he whispered as continued to frustrate Dean's efforts to disengage. "It was not a good thing, what it was when I did it which I'm sorry what I did. It was a bad thing. You know my temper."

"Let's forget it, Jer," said the singer.

This bit of encouragement set Jerry off again. "I love this man!" Tears, real tears, rolled down his cheeks.

"Let's you and me go get a drink, pardner," Dean said.

"Dat would be a good thing," Jerry replied. "You still

like me, Dean? I've been a bad boy." He suddenly quit grappling and dropped his hands to his sides. He bowed his head in contrition. Even after four years together on the road and on the studio lots, Dean couldn't stay angry when Jerry went into this number.

"Of course, of course, little buddy," Dean answered. "Let's go get us that little drink." Or maybe a big drink. Jerry was really up, really hyper, tonight. Maybe he should switch to doubles.

* *

"What if he wins, Chuck?"

"Never happen."

"But what if...."

"We're co-editors, I should get half."

"Half his winnings?"

"Right. He can keep all of the losings."

"But the winnings..."

"Half mine!" If those giant American silver dollars poured out of some fruit machine, if Walter didn't pour them right back into the slot. If no one mugged him outside the casino. If he didn't spend it on something frivolous like food.

Chuck Harris stopped his rapid fire note writing and sat there, silently contemplating the possibilities embodied in the cartwheels of if.

* *

Agent Sam Carruthers was running out of patience. He was tired, his feet hurt, and he had combed the Four Queens from one end of the casino to the other without seeing anyone who might be the courier. He *had* seen a number of women who made him wonder why the owners of the establishment had only boasted about four queans. There must be a hundred of them in the place.

He decided to walk over to the Mojave Beacon to see how Petrie was doing. If he'd drawn a blank, too, they'd pack it in for the night. Maybe the drop wasn't going to happen tonight anyway. They could try again tomorrow.

The place was in an uproar when he entered the casino. The world's most popular comedy team was cutting up in the middle of slot machine country, and a crowd was gathering to watch their impromptu show.

It didn't take long to spot Petrie sitting in front of a one-armed bandit. And just on the other side of the row, a man clutching a quarter, who was recoiling from the two entertainers like they were radioactive.

But who was that big man in the suit looking daggers at him? And why was an equally tough-looking suspect rushing toward the man Petrie had evidently fingered as the courier? Carruthers didn't know, and he couldn't exactly sidle up to his partner and ask.

He didn't want anything to scare the courier off, make him cancel the microdot drop now that the Bureau was so close to catching the spies and breaking up a commie cell.

It was a split-second decision. He made a beeline for the man in motion. The other guy could wait.

Chapter Four

Everyone said that Las Vegas was the next entertainment capital of the world, but he didn't expect the show to leap off the stage and into his face.

First almost running into the refugee from a George Raft movie who'd blocked his way, and then turning around to see the old fighter's pop-eyed stare and slack-jawed astonishment. And then the big guy had led the fighter away. He'd jumped a foot when a comedy team he recognized from trailers for a dozen movies which he had taken great pains to avoid started auditioning their act right in front of him.

And when he looked away from Jerry's shenanigans in distaste, he'd spotted another behemoth in a fancy suit barreling toward him. Just when it seemed nothing would stave off this latest danger, a husky blond man stalked across the casino like he had corns on both feet and stopped the onrushing stranger with one meaty hand on his forearm.

"You'd better come with me, sir," the blond man said.

"You're in *my* casino, you sonovabitch," the other snapped. "Get your hands off me!" It was a toss-up as to which of their faces was the redder.

The blond reached into his coat, and Walter discovered that the casino was suddenly short of air. He took a deep breath and held it, waiting to see if this was going to be one of those famous American shoot-outs.

Irrationally, he wondered what kind of obituary Chuck would write in *Hyphen*. He hoped it would be funny, but then realized that was ridiculous. It would be written by his friend, his pal, his comrade in arms, Chuck Harris. It would be hilarious. People would be laughing all the way to the grave.

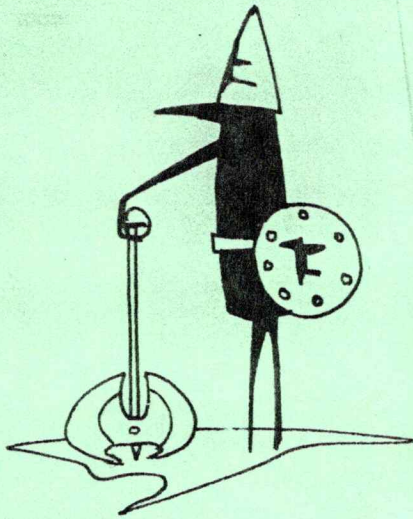
When the hand emerged with a wallet, Walter expelled a gust of air like a deflated balloon. The one who'd gotten stopped looked at the wallet, and his eyes widened.

Abruptly, the complexion of the situation changed. His aggressiveness evaporated, and he seemed all solicitude as he led the blond man from the casino floor.

This unusual occurrence broke him out of his indecision. Time was passing, Walter realized, and it would pass him by completely if he didn't play his sticky quarter soon. They still had a lot of miles to cover to the Ackermansion in Los Angeles.

* *

The courier had apparently made up his mind. Petrie collected his remaining change and scooped some coins out of the pay trough where he'd left them. The Director would expect an accounting of every penny. He began to move down his row, staying parallel with the Irishman.



* *

Tony Martinelli felt like he could do no wrong. He thought he was going to have to prove the right to his nickname when he saw Marty rumbling toward him with violence in his eyes. Then the blond geezer, who looked like some kind of cop, had intercepted him. Bentnose -- Tony felt safe thinking of him that way with his scheme so close to completion - had gotten hot, but the stranger had cooled him out just as quickly. Maybe he *was* heat.

Antonio "Tony Guts" Martinelli didn't give a damn. What was important was that he'd blocked off the entrance to the bust-out aisle and intimidated the guy with the quarter into going just where Bentnose didn't want him to go, into the big jackpot aisle.

And now he was closing in on a machine with a million-dollar double-jackpot. If something funny was going to happen, Tony knew, this was the spot.

Then he noticed another guy edging closer to Mr. Two-Bits. He was wearing a suit, which was not exactly the usual thing in Vegas in early September. Then he noticed the brown wing-tipped shoes. Must be the blond guy's partner, Tony decided. Another damn Fed!

Later, when he thought about it, Tony couldn't figure why he'd made a move. Letting the foreigner play his quarter just seemed like the most important thing in the world at the moment, and any threat to the play had to be erased. That's why he stuck out his size 12 and sent the younger Fed ass over teakettle into the change kiosk.

* *

Walter heard the commotion, but he had long since exhausted any curiosity. This place was a little *too* exciting. He'd better just try his luck and get back to his traveling companions at the Golden Nugget.

The flashing "Double Golden Jackpot" sign over a particularly large and ornate slot machine caught his eyes

and he strode right up to it with sudden decisiveness.

It was beautiful in a garish way, shrouded in chrome polished so brightly he could have shaved in the reflection. Well, he'd always had one too many close shave tonight, so he decided to concentrate on this gambling business.

Walter A. Willis, fandom's favorite son, pushed the quarter into the slot. He heard it drop into place. He reached out with his strong right arm, the one that had worked the press and cranked the mimeo on so many fanzines in the last few years, and grasped the heavy iron lever. Remember, he told himself, the magic machine is the one with the trufan at the handle.

He tugged the lever. At first he felt resistance, but then as it swung from the vertical to the horizontal, some inner mechanism took over and it slammed all the way down. He let go, it snapped back, and the three little wheels began to spin.

Cha-chunk! The left-most wheel stopped. A bar. Walter looked at the pay-off chart. Bars were a good thing.

Cha-chunk! The second wheel clicked into place. Another bar! Rapid consultation with the with pay-out chart revealed that Walter was now two-thirds of the way to the Double Golden Jackpot.

Cha-Chunk!

A Bar.

A Bar!

Three bars. One, two, three.

The noise of the casino faded.

Time stood still.

He imagined himself hitting killer shots on his professional hoodminton court. He saw Madeleine glorious in her new wardrobe of designers originals. Just for a second, he glimpsed his palatial office in the *Hyphen* building.

He could not believe it. He looked back at the slot machine's window. Yes, three bars.

And then, the center bar gave a little shudder and kicked over to an Orange.

"Let's see..." he checked the chart and then rechecked it again. "...nothing."

So he hadn't won.

He let out a long breath. Somehow, he felt more relaxed than he had in hours. He'd risked his quarter, and it had disappeared into the insatiable maw of this American fruit machine.

He turned away from the machine and hurried to the exit. No sense antagonizing the other four by making them wait. Heck, there was probably at least one neofan out there mailing him a new sticky quarter. Maybe two.

He didn't think he'd write up the incidents in the Mojave, though. Who'd believe it, anyway?

* *

"Mr. Martinelli," said a voice behind him. It was Freddie Picata, Don Scallopini's nephew and all-purpose errand boy.

"Yeah, Freddie," he said without even turning around.

"Don Scallopini is waiting to talk to you over there," Freddie said, pointing to one of the little tables adjoining the

slot machine area.

The Don did not look happy. Maybe he saw my play, Tony thought. The Don did not look like a man about to congratulate him for his guts.

* *

"You didn't get the red courier?" Sam said, incredulously. "I had to sit with that blowhard Benton for 25 minutes," he complained, "and you fall over your feet?" He shook his head sadly.

"I couldn't help it, Sam," Petrie said, trying not to whine. "And by the time I got up again, the guy was gone. The Director will have my head for this."

Agent John Petrie was a picture of all-American misery. Carruther couldn't stand it. Rules were rules, but this was his partner, even if he was a screw-up.

"Or maybe the drop didn't happen," he offered.

"Didn't happen," Petrie echoed.

"And if it didn't happen, then you didn't miss anything," Carruthers continued.

"And if nothing happened..."

"You have nothing to report," Carruthers finished for him. "We'll get those commies next time."

"Thanks, Sam," he said. "I won't forget this."

"You eat yet?" Sam replied. "I could go for a steak."

"It's on me, Sam," Petrie said, voice a-quiver with gratitude. "Let's go to the lounge restaurant. I saw Rocky Himself heading there earlier."

"Jersey Joe will murder him," Samn announced.

* *

"You did it, Harry," Laney said triumphantly. "You stopped them cold in 1952! You saved Willis for Fandom! The celebrated Laney laugh brayed forth in its full stentorian glory.

"How did you gimmick the slot machine to stop the jackpot engineered by Anti-Fan?"

"Well Francis, it wasn't my magnetic personality, he said opening his palm to reveal a fat metal horseshoe shaped object.

They both laughed.

Epilogue

Marty Benton had a particularly bad piece of luck when he was crushed in an elevator shaft in Parrump, Nevada. What made the accident particularly tragic is that the falling elevator smashed him seventeen times.

Rocky beat Joe Walcott in Philadelphia in 13 rounds for his 43rd consecutive victory. He became a popular, and undefeated, heavyweight champion on the world.

Frank, embarrassed by his failure to make Willis' gambling experience memorable, gafiated and closed the New Jersey post office box.

Dean and Jerry made about a dozen more movies and then split up violently in 1958. They did not talk to each other for more than 20 years.

Walter A. Willis *still co-edited* *Hyphen* with Chuck (now Chuch) Harris. He is the co-author of *The Enchanted Duplicator* and *Beyond the Enchanted Duplicator*. He has been to the United States twice more, but has never expressed any desire to revisit Las Vegas.

Joyce Worley went on her first date in 1952 and discovered that her interest in boys was mutual. She now lives in Las Vegas, but has never hit a Double Golden Jackpot.

Tommy Smegmalian promoted wrestling in Montana before retiring to Florida where he lives with Monica Flowers.

They are still searching for several body parts formerly attached to **Antonio Martinelli**, including most of his intestines.

A. Vincent Clarke continues his illustrious fan career, with time out for a little gafia, to this very day.

Arnie Katz wrote this story.

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by
Arnie Katz