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CONTENTS

THE DWARF By Ray Bradbury.....	6
SCREAM AT SEA By Algis Budrys.....	18
THE WILL By Walter M. Miller Jr.....	27
THE DISENCHANTED By Wallace West and John Hillyard.	42
WISH IT AWAY By Frank Freeman.....	60
THE GOOD DOG By Jerome Bixby.....	63
THE ODYSSEY OF HENRY THISTLE By Vern Fearing.....	74
MR. DITTMAN'S MONSTERS By William P. McGivern.....	95
A NICE THING TO KNOW By Sam Merwin.....	102
THE SISTERS By Gordon Schendel.....	117

SPECIAL FEATURE

A PORTFOLIO By Ernest Schroeder.....	70
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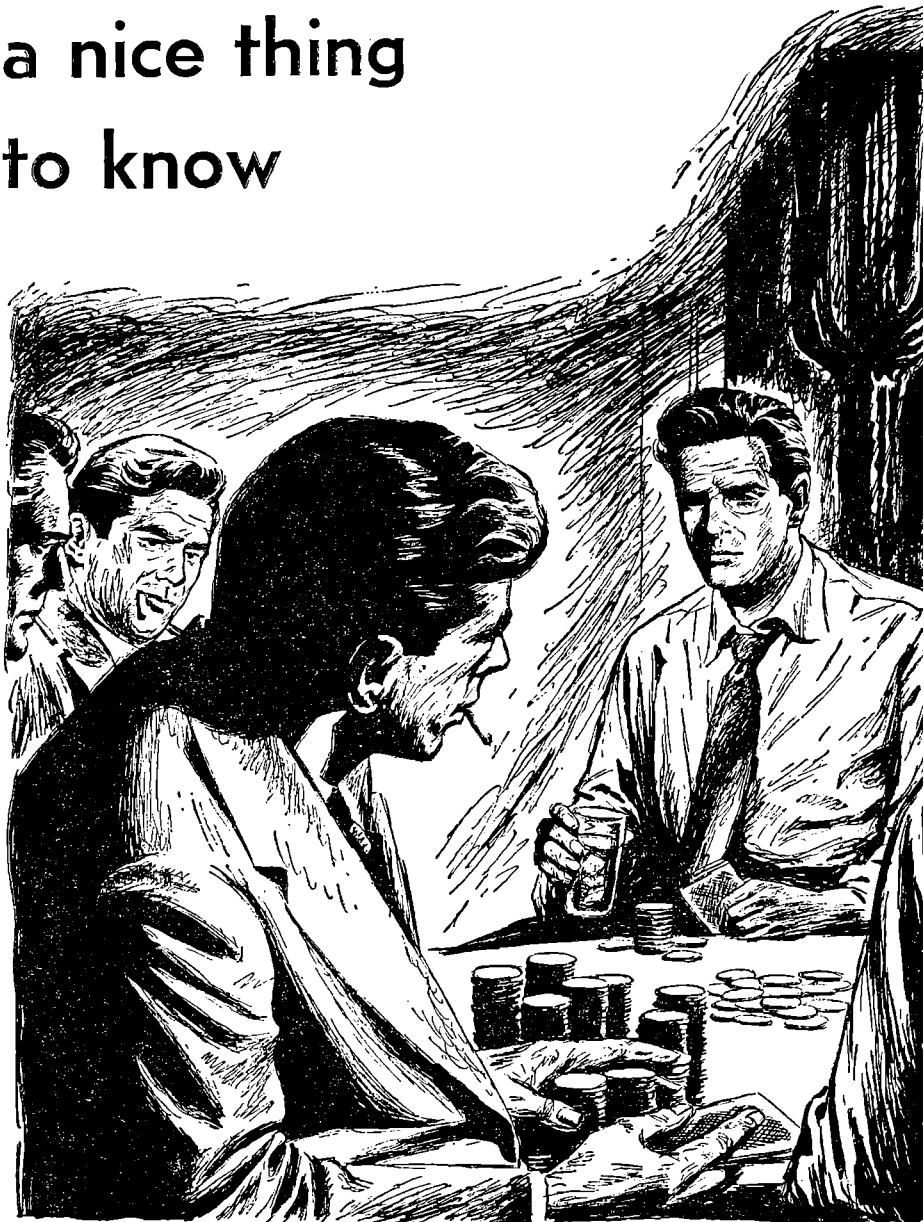
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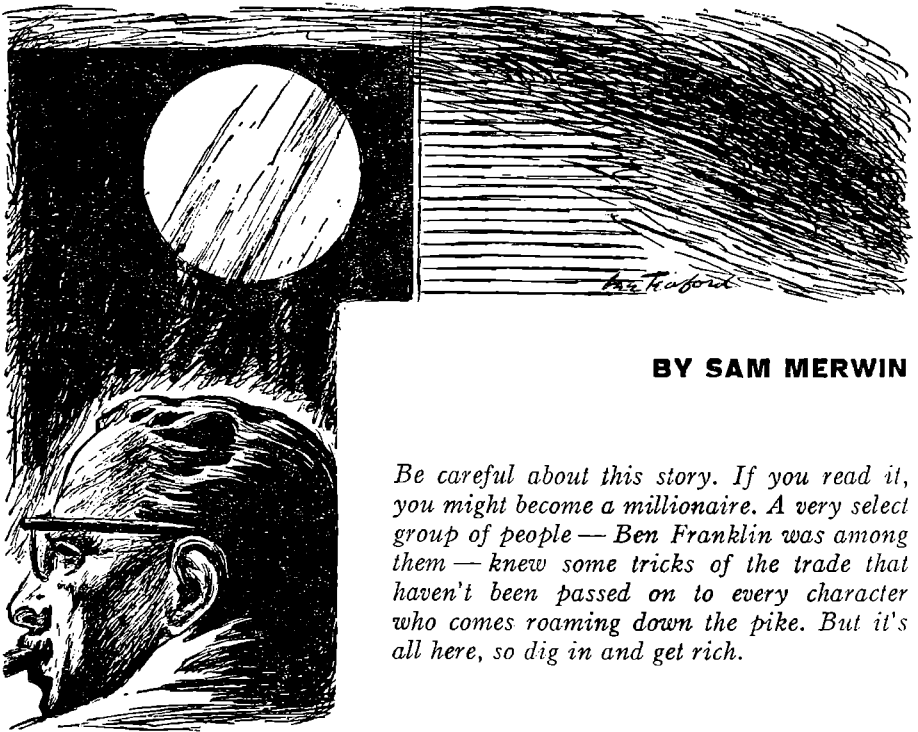
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a nice thing
to know





BY SAM MERWIN

Be careful about this story. If you read it, you might become a millionaire. A very select group of people — Ben Franklin was among them — knew some tricks of the trade that haven't been passed on to every character who comes roaming down the pike. But it's all here, so dig in and get rich.

SHE wore her ugliness like a tiara. In the blue-glass dimness of the hotel barroom, she represented an open challenge to the uniform comeliness of the ladies of pleasure seated on the barstools or scattered with their men at the midnight tables. An alert intelligent good-humored challenge they could not hope to meet.

She took the stool next to Johnny Orlando and said, "What are you drinking?" They were the first words she had spoken to him.

He looked at her with outward somberness, masking the answering humor he felt. "You wouldn't like it," he told her. "It's seltzer — alka variety."

She ordered a scotch mist from Tom Wilson, the bartender. She said, "Big one tonight?"

He nodded — after all, gambling was legal in Nevada. He said, "Real big."

She hesitated, not at a loss for words but taking time to select the words she wished. She said, "I'm Nancy McColl."

He said, "I know — and I'm Johnny Orlando."

She sipped her drink and looked at him over the rim of the broad low glass. She had a broad low face that reminded him of a bulldog. She said, "What do you know about gambling, Johnny?"

He said, "What do you know about law, Nancy?" She was, as Johnny and a great many others knew, perhaps the most successful woman attorney in the United States, with the possible exception of Fanny Holtzman.

She smiled and she wasn't ugly. She said, "Everything I can manage to find out."

He said, "Well . . . ?"

She said, "What about Gerolamo Cardano?"

He said, "Cardano's been dead almost four hundred years. What about him?"

She moved her glass back and forth on the ebony surface. She said, "He was a great gambler, Johnny — he was way ahead of his time."

He said, "Cardano was a primitive. He died broke."

She said, "He pioneered discovery of the laws of probability."

He said, "But he didn't know enough. If he hadn't had that medicine kick going for him he'd never have got a stake."

She said, "You called him a primitive. You're right — but if you've studied his works you respect him."

"Sure I respect him." Johnny wasn't annoyed, merely puzzled. "But he was a jerk. He thought he got luck by facing a rapidly rising moon when he played."

Her reply was almost a whisper. She said, "Johnny, the moon rises tonight at twelve forty-six. What time is it now?"

He peered at the platinum dial on his wrist. "Twelve twenty-nine," he said. "Why?"

"What time's your game, Johnny?"

"In about ten minutes," he said. The implications suddenly sank home. He pushed his near-empty glass of alka-seltzer away, slipped off the stool. He said, "Good-night, Miss McColl."

She said, "You might give it a try — if you can face the moon."

He could hear the driving beat of the dance orchestra playing in the Desert Room as he crossed the lobby to the elevators. The second show would be coming on in a few minutes. This time he wouldn't be able to catch Linda's song-and-dance act. He let his glance linger on the live-size blowup of Linda by the elevators — Linda wearing glittering black sequin bolero and skintight shorts, with black lace stockings that made her look incredibly long-legged. He thought, with a trace of regret, *Business before pleasure . . .*

Markheim had rented the penthouse for the game. It was going

to be Markheim and his syndicate against Johnny Orlando and his rich tough little group of Eastern millionaire backers. Actually, if things went by the book, there would be little exchange of funds between Markheim and Johnny. It would be the others, the suckers, the Texas oilmen and Hollywood doughboys, who would be paying off. They didn't mind dropping a few tens of thousands now and then, just to be able to say they'd had a seat in the big game. They gloried in their losses, magnified them, heavy as they were.

And Markheim and his syndicate, or Johnny and his backers, got richer off them. Not that there was anything crooked about it — the others just weren't good enough, barring runs of luck.

It was Johnny's purpose in life to break Markheim's syndicate — just as it was Markheim's to bust Johnny's backers. On a small scale it was like the world picture — with Russia and America; each too powerful to whip the other, waiting for an inner crackup while the lesser elements in the game, the neutrals, got crushed between them.

Markheim wore chartreuse slacks and a pale lavender silk sports shirt and a cummerbund that looked dazzle-painted. His face was a smooth healthy tan, thanks to masseur and sunlamp, and his teeth were his own. He

weighed close to three hundred pounds and liked to show them. He said, "Jesus, Johnny, if I didn't have this game going you'd never of let that broad of yours out of the hay enough to make her shows."

From Markheim, that was polite amiability. Johnny replied in kind. He said, "At least I've got a broad, Mickey. I don't spend all my spare time cheating myself at solitaire."

It got a laugh — more of a laugh than it rated. Markheim threw a fat, surprisingly muscular arm across Johnny's shoulders and chuckled and said, "That's my boy!" Johnny could almost feel the hate oozing out of his pores.

They moved out onto a glassed-in porch, where the table was set up. It looked east over the desert and Johnny could see a lemon-sherbet streak at the foot of the sky where the moon was struggling to rise. He felt a sudden shaft of something like fear. How had that lawyer-woman known he'd even be able to see the moon? Was she part of some deal setting him up for a Patsy?

All right, he thought, *I'm warned*. Seven in the game — but only two who counted. Himself and Markheim. Feeling like a small boy making a gesture of defiance, Johnny took the seat that faced the moon. The game was five-card stud.

Ninety-seven minutes later, he

was one hundred seventy-seven thousand dollars ahead. If he had felt able to trust his luck entirely the score might have been a cool quarter million. And all but sixty-two thousand of it was Markheim's syndicate money. It was incredible — he had taken ridiculous chances, testing his luck, and all of them had paid off.

But Cardano, the great sixteenth-century scientist gambler, died broke. It didn't make sense.

Markheim's smile looked as if it were propped up with toothpicks. He said, "Maybe we better change seats."

"Okay by me," said Johnny. He wanted to see what would happen when he wasn't facing the moon. But the moon was already high in the night-sky, on the verge of disappearing above the penthouse roof. The Hollywood character who got his seat had only average luck the rest of the night.

So did Johnny. He played them close to his vest and when they broke it up at breakfast time he was only a hundred fifty thousand ahead. Markheim, grey under his tan, punched him in the kidneys when he left. "Talk about the luck of the devil," he said. "I'll give odds your broad's been cheating on you tonight."

"Johnny should worry," said one of the Texans. "For a hundred and fifty gees he can buy himself a harem and five big ranches."

Johnny put his winnings in two

envelopes at the desk — thirty thousand for himself, a hundred twenty for his backers — and had the night manager stash them in the hotel safe. It had been a big night, a real big night, the biggest he'd ever had. But he wasn't happy about it.

He went up to his rooms on the seventh floor. Linda was waiting for him, huddled in a corner of the living room sofa, asleep. With her blue-black hair feather-cut around her soft young features, she might have been a little girl. He picked her up — she was light in his arms — and took off her robe and stretched her out on the satin spread. Her arms went around his neck and she kissed him but her eyes remained tightly closed. The gold chain with the gold cross she wore about her neck was dark against the whiteness of her skin.

Johnny was too nervous, too worried, too highly keyed, to feel sleepy. He stripped, took a long shower, got into sports clothes. He looked at his watch — it was almost nine o'clock. On impulse he moved to the living room telephone, called Nancy McColl's room. She said, "It went all right, didn't it, Johnny?"

He said, "Have breakfast with me downstairs in fifteen minutes."

She looked even uglier than the night before — and even more attractive — as she joined him on the flagged terrace overlooking

the swimming pool, which the hotel used to serve breakfast and lunch. She was, he decided errantly, the living embodiment of the triumph of character over a face.

When they had ordered, he said, "Two questions, Nancy."

Her expression was enigmatic, yet he sensed a hopefulness in her low-pitched voice as she said, "All right."

"The first is, why," he told her.

"Why did I manage your run of luck?" she countered with the ghost of a smile. "It's a long story, Johnny. Answer a question for me first. What do you believe in?"

He regarded her for a long moment. Then, "I don't know. Not much, I guess. Until last night I believed in the laws of probability. I've built my life on them, just as you've built yours on the laws of society. After last night . . ." He shrugged wearily.

"No religion? No blood ties? No inherent obligations?" Her voice was guileless.

"You may not believe this," he told her, "but I was on my way to a Phi Beta key at college until the dean booted me out for making expenses gambling. I'm damn-near educated — I read. I know about religion — a little about all of them, I guess. My Old Man was a promoter. He kept the fortunes and stepmothers coming and going so fast I never had a chance to latch onto any of them. He was a

good Joe, though — he could talk more racing than any man I ever met. I still miss him." He paused, realized he was talking too much, said, "No religion, no blood ties — no *inherent* obligations."

"What about the little dancing girl?" Nancy asked.

He looked at her, wondering what business it was of hers. Then he found himself saying, "Linda's the daughter of an old friend of mine who got a rough break. I paid for some of her schooling. I never figured it would work out this way."

"Going to marry the girl?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Maybe, when she outgrows me, she'll be ready for some boy who can give her a real break. Now — how about answering *my* question. *Why?*"

"Because there aren't many like us," she told him quietly. "Most people are caught at birth — caught in a web of possessiveness, one way or another, that makes them blind. Pre-arranged love — motherlove, fatherlove, other loves that teach us certain wholly man-made things are sacred."

"I've seen similar things," he said.

"You're wondering what this has to do with last night," she told him. "I've been watching you here this past week — I'd heard of you, naturally. You're a pretty famous guy in your way, Johnny. I got an idea you were an intel-

ligent man — really intelligent.”

“Thanks,” he said, wondering why he was interested. “I think you’re gorgeous yourself.”

“I’m in deadly earnest,” she said, unsmiling. “No man or woman can be truly intelligent until he or she starts from scratch, without any built-in predigested beliefs. What did you believe in last night — and what do you believe in now?”

He said, “Last night I believed in the laws of probability. But if you or anyone else can kick them around . . .” He shrugged.

“Most of us have an odd trick or two once we get rid of our blind spots,” she said quietly. “Me, I’m telekinetic. I can control material things, even move them around, at a distance.”

“No wonder you win your cases,” he said with a trace of scorn. “You must be able to foul up a lot of evidence.”

She looked hurt, a little shocked. “But I couldn’t,” she said. “I play by the rules.”

He said, “You’d have a hell of a time convincing Markheim of that, Nancy. If he ever finds out . . .”

“He won’t unless you tell him,” she replied.

Johnny didn’t even bother to answer. He said, “You just answered my second question — how — but you haven’t answered the first. What’s your motive in

destroying my belief in the laws of probability?”

“Need is my motive — desperate need,” she told him. “Johnny, a long time ago a man named Charles Fort wrote a book in which he insisted this earth of ours was the property of some alien being or beings. He was an eccentric — a screwball — but he was partly right. We *are* property, held in thrall by some force which has employed our instincts to chain us.”

“You might have something there,” he agreed. Then, with a frown, “But where does this alien control come in — and why?” He wondered if Nancy McColl weren’t insane.

She said, “Oh, it’s real — I’m afraid you’ll find out soon enough. They don’t like free souls. They take action against them.”

“All right,” he said. He decided to humor her. “Supposing you’re correct and I’m an enlightened being — what do I do about it? And about them?”

“You look for others and find them, as I’ve found you, Johnny,” she said quietly. “Remember, you’re an outlaw. You’re one of the feared ones — or you will be. You’re a lone wolf, operating outside of the pack. You’ll have to watch your step and do what little you can. We can’t all be Voltaires — or Franklins. You can always get in touch with me.”

He took a forkful of eggs, said,

"Dammit, these need more salt." The salt cellar moved toward him, across the table, untouched. He looked at Nancy McColl before he picked it up. He shivered.

Later he went back to the seventh floor. Linda was still asleep and he lay down and tried to rest. After awhile he got up and into his trunks and went downstairs for a dip in the pool. Word of his killing had got around by then — some of the Texans or Hollywood characters must have been talking. He was a great man — for the moment.

When he got upstairs again, Linda was up, tousled and lovely and conscience stricken. She said, "Darling, I was naughty last night. I got lonesome after the show and played roulette. I lost a lot of money."

He said, "How much, baby?"

She pouted and drew a line in the carpet with the inner edge of her slipper. She said, "Almost six hundred dollars." She looked completely adorable.

He gave her a thousand. He said, "If I ever hear of you doing it again I'll take a paddle to you. I'm not fooling."

She pulled her face away from his and saw he meant it. Hurt, she said, "But what right have you, of all people . . . ?"

"I just quit," he said. "I'm through. I'm never going to gamble again." And, as he said it, he

realized he was telling the truth. If someone like Nancy McColl could kick the laws of probability around as she had the night before, there was no point in going on.

He sat down and wrote six letters — five to his backers, one to Markheim. He wasn't worried about his backers. Not with the payment he had for them in the safe. He wasn't worried about himself. Not with the stake he now had. Markheim — well, Markheim and his syndicate could stuff the proverbial duck.

Finished, he said to Linda, curled up in a chair with orange stick and buffer, "From now on we go dancing after the show. You won't have to be bored — just stepped on."

Linda tossed the manicuring tools in the air and did a high kick. She said, "Darling, you don't know how lonely I've been!"

"Them days is over, baby," he told her, reaching for her.

Later, he drove her across the desert resort to a dance studio, where Linda had a practice period to spend. The kid worked hard, he thought, idly tooling his big convertible along one of the unpaved roads beyond the outskirts of town. When she was fully grown up, a three-dimensional woman, she would already be solidly established talent. She would never go hungry — he had already seen to that.

He drove up into the foothills, past a sagging ghost-ranch, a casualty of the Great Drought of the early Thirties. For some reason, the eeriness of the deserted ruin reminded him of Nancy McColl and the strange bill of goods she had tried to sell him. He shuddered although the day was warm.

The woman must be out of her mind, he decided, famous lawyer or not. And yet — there was that business of the cards the night before. It could have been coincidence, of course. But his trained gambler's mind refused to accept it. On the whole he was glad he had finished with that phase of his career. He imagined what Markheim was calling him just then — and smiled to himself. It would be the first time in decades, to Johnny's certain knowledge, that the big syndicate gambler had ever come out a permanent loser to anyone.

If Nancy McColl ever talked to anyone else as she had talked to him that morning — and if Markheim ever got wind of it — she would need more than words to get out of it. He wondered a little at her special gift. Telekineses, was it? He wondered if he had any special powers. A free soul — property — outside the pack.

His comment was crisp.

He found himself approaching a turnaround spot, well up in the

hills, overlooking a panorama of the valley in twilight. Lights were beginning to dot the anachronism of the city with orange punctuation points. The city — town rather — with its low houses and outbuildings, its copse of hotel towers. Against the flat sweep of the desert, it might have been a toytown, built by a child with his blocks in the center of some vast playground floor.

Built by men and women with love and obligations to fulfill — built to fulfill these obligations. Johnny decided again that the lawyer woman was crazy. He felt his breast pocket, heard the reassuring crinkle of the envelopes, thanked Allah he hadn't mailed them. Nancy McColl, along with her reputation for legal shrewdness, had a name for not being over-particular about the clients she accepted. He began to get a new aspect toward recent events.

The syndicate — Mickey Markheim's syndicate — must have hired her to get him — Johnny Orlando — out of the big game for keeps. They would certainly be willing to pay big money to do it, since with himself gone Mickey would pick up all the blue chips. Thus viewed, the strange current of the game the night before lost its magical angle. As for the salt-cellar at breakfast — that could easily have been gimmicked.

Johnny put his big car in gear again, turned around and drove back down the winding dusty road through the foothills. He picked up Linda and drove her back to the hotel.

They had an early dinner together on the terrace overlooking the pool. It was a fairyland in the soft flattering early-evening darkness — man-made, expensive,

but at least as authentic as the fairylands of the Assassins, from which the leaders of that Near-Eastern Murder Incorporated sent its drugged agents, only too happy to die in the course of their lethal assignments for a return ticket.

Linda's dark eyes were dancing. She said, "Johnny, I'm so glad you've decided to quit. We can dance all night — between shows."



"Quick, Chauncey! The pilots' manual!"

"Tomorrow night," he told her. "I've got a few loose ends to wrap up first."

She looked like a child whose ice-cream cone had fallen into the mud. She said, "Oh, but Johnny —" Then she accepted it, as she accepted his every decision. She said, "Only tonight?"

He said, "Only tonight. There's one thing I have to be sure of." He gripped a slim young wrist atop the tablecloth, added, "We can really begin our playing tomorrow."

She said, "Of course, Johnny." She sighed and looked sad, but not for long. She looked around at the other tables. "Isn't it exciting — the test and everything?"

He said, "What test, baby?"

She shook her head, playing the reproving mother, said, "Honestly, Johnny, sometimes I think you don't know anything. They're setting off some kind of a new bomb tomorrow morning."

Johnny felt sheepish. He ought to have known about it. He took a very real pride in following world events. He said, "Maybe the concussion will break some of the glass in Markheim's pent-house." It was a stupid remark but all he could think of at the moment. Coming so soon after last night, it made him a little afraid. The Russians had it too. Maybe the end of the world *was* coming close. Maybe Nancy Mc-

Coll had something after all.

He shut his eyes and counted ten slowly. Then he took a deep breath. The knot of fear untied itself in his diaphragm.

He managed to get in a couple of hours' sleep after dinner. Then he went back to the bar. Tom Wilson said, "The usual, Mr. Orlando?" Johnny yawned widely and nodded.

The barstool beside him was empty. He didn't even look around when Nancy McColl took it. He said, "Hello, Nancy."

She said, "Going to try it again, Johnny?"

He said, "That's right — any suggestions about tonight?"

She said, "Just hold onto your hat, that's all." She was damnably matter of fact, damnably convincing — and damnably unsatisfying.

He said, "Who are you working for, Nancy?"

She said, "Who do you think, Johnny?"

He said, "What do they want me to do?"

She laughed. She said, "I didn't think you'd fall for what I told you this morning. What do we want you to do?" She hesitated and once again he could sense her choosing her words. Only this time it didn't seem to him she was thinking as a lawyer. She seemed more like somebody picking the words she wanted in a foreign language.

"What do we want you to do?" she repeated. "You know a lot of big people, Johnny — people with influence. In your way, you're important to a lot of them. They'll listen to you because you're Johnny Orlando, the gambler. Most of them, underneath, would give a lot to be you. When *you* get religion, they will too. They'll be easier for us Johnny boy — much easier."

Johnny sighed and said, "What's in it for me?"

She said, "That's my Johnny." She was smiling again. She said, "We pay off — you'll find out. And when the time comes, we'll see you come out of it on top."

He wondered again if she were crazy. He said, "What happens if I don't play?"

She didn't stop smiling. She said, "Johnny, we wouldn't hurt *you*. A few years ago, we wanted help from a famous woman playwright, a woman who had married an immensely powerful publisher. She was a lot like you, Johnny. She didn't think she believed in anything. But when her daughter died in an auto crash, she believed quite spectacularly. A few years before that there was a film star who could help us. He had a beautiful young wife, also a film star. She died in a plane crash. Since then he has proved very useful. And there was —"

"All right," he interrupted. "I'm used to mobsters. If I hadn't

known how to handle them since I was a kid, I wouldn't be alive today."

"This is bigger than any mob operation," she told him coolly. Then, after a pause, "You're going to be very lucky tonight — you and the people you like."

He said, "Have your fun. But pick another target."

She shook her head, said pleasantly, "Oh no, Johnny — you're the one we want."

He went up to Markheim's penthouse with a sense of soundless invisible footsteps on his heels. There, in the familiar and plush cutthroat atmosphere, he was able to shake it — until the game began. He was careful not to take a seat facing the rising moon. *Gerolamo Cardano!* he thought. *Gerolamo and Nancy McColl — lunatics!*

Only two of the five suckers of the night before were present. But three new ones had taken the places of the missing losers and, save for these substitutions and the different seating, it might almost have been a repetition of the earlier game.

Sensing that his luck was still in, Johnny decided to lean back and let it run for him — with a silent apology to his backers for taking such chances with their money. He picked up another hundred forty thousand in a couple of hours, then dropped forty,

clean as a knife. He made seventy more, playing like a deliberate idiot, then dropped twenty. The percentages were too pat. He knew now that the cards were being controlled.

He also knew they were not being controlled by anyone in the game—he was much too experienced a gambler not to have spotted any snide moves. And he knew he himself was making none.

Markheim wasn't so sure. His deceptively gentle grey eyes watched every move Johnny made. And when Johnny decided to quit, he said, "Maybe you'd better take a vacation, Johnny. Maybe your luck is a little too rich for my blood."

"Maybe it's a little too rich for mine too," said Johnny. He made an amateur's suggestion, "Want to try double or nothing, just between us, on a last draw?"

Markheim began to sweat as desire and fright made a mask of his round face. He caught the lighted half of his cigar as it fell from his lips, dropped it into an ashtray with a curse, removed the bitten-through butt from his teeth. He mopped his brow with a cerise silk handkerchief. Then he shook his head.

"You better get back to your broad," he said.

Linda was not asleep this morning when he returned from making his deposits at the desk down-

stairs. She was aburst with life, with a vibrant excitement that made him feel even more drained and empty by contrast. The words came tumbling from her lips.

"Johnny—guess what? Greg Ohman—the Greg Ohman—caught my act at both shows tonight. He wants me for a part in the new three-D musical at Colossal, a small part with a big appeal. I thought you'd *never* get back, darling. He's flying me to Hollywood in his private plane at seven this morning, so I can rehearse today and test tomorrow and be back here tomorrow night for my shows. The management says it's okay. Isn't that terrific, darling?"

Johnny sat down hard and Linda, with a dancer's pirouette, flew lightly into his lap and kissed him. "Say you think it's terrific too, darling," she whispered urgently.

"Terrific?" he countered. "Sure I think it's terrific." He almost said "terrifying." It *was* terrifying. He looked up at Linda and all at once he knew they had him. He thought of the playwright's daughter and the actor's wife and he knew what they must have felt, what they must still be feeling. He wondered what form his own dictated conversion was going to take.

He said, "Let's go for a drive first. I'd like some fresh air—

and I'd like to be with you while we can."

"But I'll be back tomorrow night, Johnny."

He said, "Sure — you'll be back."

She said fiercely, "And nothing between us is going to change — I won't let it change."

He said, "You're still a kid, baby — but I love you very much."

"Johnny!" she exclaimed. "You never really said that before." There were near-tears in her dark eyes.

He said, "Guess I never dared admit it to myself before."

She said, "You wonderful idiot, Johnny."

He said, "I'll go with you on the idiot part of that. Come on, let's take that drive."

There were a number of cars, almost amounting to traffic, on the deserted mountain road of the evening before. Some were gleaming new convertibles that matched his own. Others were more usual inverted-bathtub sedans. There was a pickup truck and one ancient Model-A that chugged its way noisily and painfully up the slope.

All of them were full of people, though it was not yet dawn. Johnny thought, *What the hell?* — and then he remembered the test. His first impulse was to turn around and drive somewhere else.

His second was to go ahead and see it. To date such abstrusities as A and H-bombs had belonged to another world. They didn't seem to anymore.

The turnaround where he had watched the twilight some twelve hours earlier was packed with cars but Johnny managed to wedge the convertible into a fair spot. He and Linda sat there and smoked and said very little until, behind the lower ridge on the far side of the valley, the fading night sky suddenly bloomed with unearthly brilliance that seemed to take an interminably long time in fading.

He knew it was sixty or more miles away but it seemed appallingly close. After a bit the shock wave struck them a palpable blow and whirled up a small wall of dust about the cars and then came a long low thunderous rumble.

"It's like the *Road to Mandalay*," said Linda. "You know — 'where the dawn comes up like thunder?'"

"I'm going to have to have the car washed," he said. "Come on, let's get out of this. I can get you breakfast at one of these barbecue joints and still get you to the airport in time."

The cloud rose over the other ridge, looking slow and gay and oddly innocent against the dawn sky. It was the double mushroom of the H-bomb, not the single mushroom of the A-bomb. He found himself unable to watch

it and got busy working the car back onto the road.

Greg Ohman, looking tired, was waiting for Linda when they reached the airport. He and Johnny had known one another casually for years. Teeth flashed in a smile beneath his dark glasses and he said, "Sorry to swipe your girl, Johnny."

"It's all right," said Johnny. "It's fine. A great break for the kid."

"You know, it's crazy," the film producer told him. "Here I'm supposed to be a genius, a great discoverer and developer of new talent. I've knocked myself out trying to find the right girl for this part — while all the time Linda's been operating in plain sight. It's enough to make a fellow doubt he's a genius."

"You think she'll make it?" Johnny asked softly, out of ear-shot of the girl.

"Christ, not a doubt of it," Ohman told him. "You do things well, Johnny — you trained this one right. She's got it all."

"How'd you happen to spot her?" Johnny asked quietly.

"How do you think?" was the reply. "I got a tip from a mutual friend of ours. She's right over there."

He nodded toward a woman in slacks and sweater and bandanna, who was talking to the pilot of the plane. She turned then and

Johnny saw it was Nancy McColl. She came toward them, smiling, and said, "This is swell, Johnny. You can drive me back to the hotel."

He wanted to ask her what she had done to the pilot. The idea of Linda, burned and torn to pieces in a plane crash, was more than he could stomach. She seemed to read his thoughts. When the plane had taken off and they were driving back to the hotel alone together, she said, "Don't worry, Johnny, your Linda will be all right — this time."

"I get it," said Johnny. He thought bitterly, *I'm the guy with no religion, no blood ties, no inherent obligations — the guy who believed only in the laws of chance.*

Again she seemed to read him. She said, "Don't take it so hard, Johnny — you and your Linda will be all right. People like you, who won't admit your beliefs to yourselves, are the people who work best for us. Others respect you and envy you your independence — and when you surrender it they retain their respect and lose their envy. You're the important ones, the ones we need."

"Thanks," said Johnny. "Thanks very much." He wondered what Nancy really was, what he was going to have to do. What the future held for him. It would be a nice thing to know.