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"Say you lied," I screamed in fear and anger, "—or I'll kill you!"

GAMBLER'S GOLD

How a dead man's curse and a fatal card ruined "Lucky Chambino"

I RELEASED the pulse of Fernande Chambino, and his arm fell listlessly back on the white

sheet. He spoke with extreme difficulty. "Go ahead, Doc, you can tell me."

I regarded him speculatively.

"Yes, Chambino," I agreed, "I can tell you. You'll live an hour, maybe two, but that's all. You've enough oxalic acid in your system to kill you twice over. But knowing you as I do, I can hardly believe that you would do a thing like this—commit deliberate suicide."

"Suicide?" Chambino's voice held a sardonic note. "Well—maybe. You say I'll live an hour. Then listen and decide for yourself whether it's suicide or—well, listen—"

My story begins with an ace of spades—and ends there. Just the black-pipped ace of spades—that one card out of the fifty-two.

By
JACK D'ARCY

To anyone else, it's just a good card to hold, or money in the bank when held along with two others, but to me, well, it's just a spade. A spade to dig with—to shovel with. Every time I turn the card I hear it rattle the first shovelful of dirt on my coffin. But thank God I've seen it for the last time tonight.

As you know I'm a gambler. I lived that way all my life, until the first coming of the black ace, and I'll die that way, too. There was no one more flashy or quick with a pack of cards than I; and I had a hand that was just as quick on a gun. This was back in the days when Nevada was a waste of dusty desert, with a hell-hole gambling town around every well of water.

I was called "Lucky Chambino." I *was* lucky. Dame Fortune smiled on me, gave me hunches, backed up my bluffs, froze out the other guys. And if at times I forced

my luck a bit in a pinch, with a cold deck or a fast pass—well, what of it? It's too late for regrets.

There are still quite a few old timers who can remember the day when Mino was a ramshackle, dusty, flea-bitten collection of shacks, every one of them dedicated to that unholy trinity—Cards, Rum and Women. There was always a fair amount of play. Though the stakes were never tremendously big, the games were pretty regular and there was always some new sand-bitten man trekking into town with a fresh run of yellow gold.

I WAS pretty comfortable. Lucky Chambino was sitting in clover. Nothing to do all day but loll at the bars and match for drinks between yarns. And when this would pall it was the easiest thing in the world to turn the corner to the row of houses beyond, there to entertain the girls with a few clever passes from a deck of cards. They were an appreciative, goggle-eyed bunch and I liked 'em all.

For two years I made money, spent it and still had some left over. Pretty regularly, my pile was growing down in the Express Office safe. As my stakes grew larger and the luck of Lucky Chambino became a byword, it became harder and harder to get the boys to play against me.

"Too lucky," they said jokingly.

One night, things were pretty slow. I sat at my table and ran the chips through my fingers. After a spell of this, I riffled the deck a few times, slapping the two halves together after the cut with a sharp, clear, staccato flip. But the bait drew no one to my table and I had made up my mind that it was time to pull up my tent stakes and haul—when it happened.

The swinging doors were pushed slowly open and a tall, gaunt, cadaverous figure walked noiselessly into the room. A profound silence was punctuated by an audible gasp here and there as the man's features were recognized. A dancing girl giggled nervously. Someone dropped a poker chip and the resultant click sounded like a roar of thunder. The bartender wiped his brow with a beery bar cloth. Simpkins, a man we still called "Sheriff" because he had been that fifteen years ago, reached for his gun, stopped and said hoarsely. "It's Swenson, or—or his ghost."

The tall stranger opened his skeleton-like jaw and spoke. His voice was a grating monotone.

"Yes," he said. "It's Swenson, back from the grave."

That's exactly what his voice sounded like—as though it were being projected from the tomb.

Again the ex-sheriff broke an awesome silence.

"You died fifteen years ago, Swenson, when I lost you on the desert."

Swenson's laugh sounded like an echo from a dank cavern.

"Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't. Anyway I've got some gold that's real enough."

He strode to the bar and tossed down the fiery liquid that the pallid bartender set before him.

Oscar Swenson was a Swede. One of the old-timers. He had prospected over Nevada's deserts for the past twenty years and there was no one who knew their trackless wastes better than he. He had been a bad man too, in his day, and with a two-gun Sheriff and a lynching posse close on his heels, had started off on foot over the great stretch of sand, with nothing but a pint of acrid water. The Sheriff lost three of his men in the dazzling, burning waste, before he gave up the hunt for Swenson as a hopeless task.

Yes, everybody had thought Swenson dead. As time went by his name became but a memory, a tradition. And then that night, years later—he came calmly walking out of the desert into our bar.

No one knew where he had been. . . . No one knew how he had come out of that baking hell alive. But there he was—tall, gaunt and emaciated. And he had brought back with him in the deep pockets of his shirt—gold, the finest nuggets I had ever seen.

THAT was his first visit and thereafter he came and went unmolested. He would be away days and weeks—and then just as suddenly he would return. And he always brought back with him more and more of those dull, yellow nuggets.

There were men in those early days who tried to discover his secret but Swenson didn't seem to mind. He knew they couldn't follow him. He had a peculiar mastery over the uncharted desert sands. Many a man trekked doggedly after him, only to return a day or so later, disgusted, distraught and disappointed. They told strange, fantastic, unbelievable tales. That sun, that terrific sun! No man's sanity could withstand it. With men close on his heels Swenson would lose himself like a pillar of sand.

The particular night of which I speak was the occasion of one of the periodical returns of Swenson.

No sooner had he entered the door than everyone crowded round him to see again the color of his treasure. Hilarity and happy anticipation prevailed; for the hangers-on knew from long experience that Swenson was soon parted from his crude wealth.

He did not disappoint them. He bought and bought and none went thirsty who had the tongue to speak.

It seemed to take gallons of the raw whiskey to wash down the dust in Swenson's throat.

I had plenty of opportunity to note that Swenson had returned with a much greater store of gold than usual. The drinking had gone far enough. It was my turn for a share of the spoils. I went over to the bar, drank a few rounds with him and then suggested we cut for drinks. He agreed. From there, it didn't take me long to get him to the table.

For the first half hour, the play was pretty even. I saw to it that the other players won a few dollars. I was taking no chances of the game breaking up for the lack of money or interest on their part. Swenson's gold was what I wanted.

It didn't take much to arouse his gambling instinct. The stakes increased and I played my cards for what they were worth. Slowly my store of gold increased and again and again Swenson's hairy hand disappeared into the dark recess of some concealed pocket, to pile on the table more and more nuggets.

The smoke of vile tobacco hung heavy over the table and, as the stakes increased, a grim, silent tension gripped the players. They hitched their chairs closer to the table and their low, terse phrases were only broken by the crisp flick of cards and the seductive music of a stack of chips run through the fingers of a nervous player.

Fortune favored me. I won. Heavily. Never before had I such a night. Purpose-



*God, it was true!
This was the
brand of Swen-
son!*

ly, I would lose an occasional small pot to one of the other players. Swenson lost more and more heavily. He tried the foolish thing of forcing his luck by playing desperately, wide open. He only succeeded in hurrying his downfall.

The inevitable came at last. The last hand.

The cards were dealt. Swenson looked at his and shoved across the green felt the last of his poke. I looked at my own hand and found a king-high inside straight to draw to. I needed a jack to fill. I stayed and matched Swenson's pile on the table. The other three threw down their hands. I filled. As Swenson had no more gold we immediately showed our cards. As I had expected he, too, had a straight—but mine was just one card higher.

FOR a long time Swenson stared fixedly at the cards. No word was spoken. The two hands remained face up on the table. Then slowly, Swenson raised his head and glared directly at me. His deep set burning eyes sought mine and held them. I felt that he could see into my very soul. I shuffled my feet uneasily and dropped my eyes. I could still feel his piercing stare stabbing into my brain. Then a chair scraped as one player rose nervously.

Through the swinging doors in front, the

sky was showing a pale gray in the East. The yellow oil lamp overhead reeked and smoked in the over-heated room and as its garish light fell on Swenson's ashy face he looked like a ghoul. I shuddered. Another chair scraped. Still Swenson did not move. I started pocketing my winnings when I was arrested by his hoarse, cracked voice.

"Wait," he said.

I paused.

"**W**AIT." Again he repeated the word. He was thinking hard. At last he took his eyes from mine and without another word he reached into his pocket and pulled forth a crumpled bit of parchment. Everyone felt that something momentous was in the air. Looking hard at me, Swenson slowly unfolded the paper and spread it out, face up, on the table. He immediately covered it with his large hand, but not before every man of us had seen that it was a map or chart of some sort.

The same thought burned into all our minds at once. Here was the secret of Swenson's gold mine! That bit of parchment spelled fortune to its possessor.

He must have read our thoughts.

"Yes," he said. "This is the secret."

Every man at the table held his breath. All eyes were strained at Swenson's wide-spread hand.

"We will play for this as stakes?" It was a question and Swenson directed it at me.

My heart raced faster as I slowly nodded. Here at last was a fortune—a real fortune—untold wealth to be decided by the turn of a card.

We agreed to deal two hands face up on the table, the higher to take all. A depressing, ominous silence filled the room. My hands were clammy as I prepared to play for the highest stake for which I had ever gambled. Dancing girls and hangers-on crowded around the table. The tension in the air became positively physical. Swenson alone remained unmoved. He gazed straight before him—past us all—through the very wall back of the bar.

"We'll cut," I said. "High card gets the deal."

Swenson nodded.

The Sheriff shuffled the deck for the cut. He put them down in front of Swenson.

The Swede, without removing his fixed stare from the wall, cut.

"Ten of diamonds," he said. I started. *He hadn't even looked at the card!*

I nervously reached across the table and

cut a king. The silence grew more ominous.

"Deal," said Swenson.

I summoned every ounce of my will to steady my rebellious fingers. I shuffled. I dealt.

The trey of diamonds went to Swenson. I got the jack of hearts. Swenson drew a queen; I, the ace of hearts. On the fourth card Swenson had no pair with queen the high card. My top was the ace.

The air was electric and my pulse hit a steady 160.

Swenson's last card was the trey of clubs. A fortune was slipping from my grasp. I fingered the cards nervously. Swenson ignored me and studied his pair of treys. With a deft flick that defied the keenest eye, I whipped the ace of spades, which was third from the bottom, onto the table. I glanced quickly around. Had anyone noticed? Swenson still studied his pair. I was safe. He hadn't even watched me deal.

The tension broke in an audible outletting of breath.

"You win," said the ex-sheriff to me.

Swenson's eyes remained fixed on the table.

"He doesn't," he said in a voice that penetrated my very marrow. "He cheated."

My brain whirled. How did he know I had cheated? He wasn't even watching me.

He reached over the table and picked up the ace of spades.

"This," he went on, "was the third card from the bottom."

Panic seized me. Was the man human? The ex-sheriff surveyed me doubtfully. Instinctively I reached for my gun.

"Say you lied," I screamed in fear and anger, "or I'll kill you."

"You can't kill me," said Swenson, but his hand was on his gun.

MY fingers clamped on the trigger before Swenson had completed his draw. He fell on the table silent—dead.

I sank to my chair weak from strain.

"Can't kill you?" I muttered triumphantly. "Well, I have."

But—had I?

"Doc," said Chambino, regarding me intently as I lifted his wrist again, "You've seen death. What do you believe?"

"When the heart ceases to beat," I said, "we pronounce a man dead. When a man is dead, he cannot die again. Whether he can live again. . . ." I finished my sentence with a shrug.

"Doc," said Chambino, with an unearthly

shadow in his eyes, "I have seen a dead man live. Swenson, dead, has lived with me since the night he fell across that table. But did I kill him then? Was he alive for me to kill?"

There was a silence, during which the man on the bed seemed striving with all his seeping strength to penetrate the unknown—that black abyss into which his waning pulse was soon to plunge him.

For a moment, he tottered on the edge of eternity, then his pulse rallied, and he began to speak again.

That night, I went to bed early. I was exhausted. I tossed on my bed for a short time and then fell into a fitful sleep. How long I slept I do not know, but I awoke with a choking constriction in my throat and a strange sound in my ears. My spine prickled with an icy sensation and yet my body burned with fever and the sheets were damp where I had lain.

What had awakened me? The dim outlines of furniture which I knew so well had suddenly become unfamiliar. I glanced across the room and was horrified to see two round burning orbs in the corner. I pulled away to the outer edge of the bed with a start.

Then in a flash I realized that it was my cat, but never before had I seen her eyes so luminous and ghastly. Her back was arched. Every hair on her spine stood separate and distinct. My panic-stricken eyes saw the arc of her back rise still higher till it seemed the spine beneath the bristling hair must crack.

Then, beginning with a demonic hiss the cat screamed. That is the only word for it. The hideous sound pulsed far back in her throat and grew. And as I watched, her hairy body grew with it—expanded with the rising snarl till it seemed that the volume and the venom of that sound must utterly destroy her. Then it tore out of her throat—a terrified, human scream that beat

through my ears to my brain. I shall never forget it! With an effort I pulled my straining eyes away from the beast.

You will say I woke from a troubled dream and saw a frightened cat. You will say that what followed was the mad imagining of a murderer. But say what you will! Believe what you will! *I know.*

That night, Oscar Swenson came to live with me. And he has lived with me ever since.

THAT night, he was in my room, I tell you. The cat knew it. So did I. I saw him. The beast in the corner screamed again. And as she screamed, she jumped straight for him. She jumped for him—and straight through him, hissing and clawing. Then the screams within my distended throat were unleashed. She landed on my bare chest and clung there. One claw dug a stinging rut in my flesh. Even then I could not lift a finger to remove her.

It is a wonder that I did not die in the madness of that moment. I have wished to

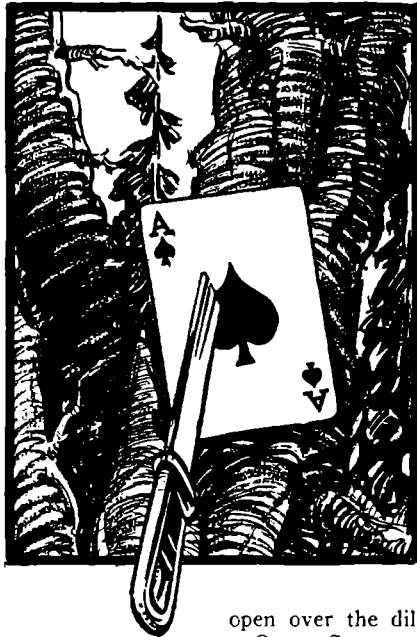
God many times since that I had. But the relentless thing that was Oscar Swenson held me to life and horror, as he has held me ever since.

Oscar Swenson advanced toward my bed. I sensed rather than saw the gray film floating toward me. The courage of agonized desperation came to me, and I flung the screaming cat from me and struggled to rise—to escape. . . .

Then came the culminating horror. Every muscle of my body was paralyzed. Even the lids of my eyes were held wide

open over the dilating pupils.*

Oscar Swenson stood beside me. Somewhere in the gray film of horror was the ace of spades! Clutched in unseen fingers, it was slowly and surely pressing down upon me. The single sable pip was growing, enormously, as it approached me, till it seemed that its expanding blackness must cover me, blot me out. . . .



But even oblivion was denied me. Oscar Swenson spoke. His voice had the cold hollow ring of the grave.

"Chambino," he said, "The Ace of spades shall mark your breast. You shall carry it through life . . . and after. . ."

The card of death descended. And though the pip upon it had the blackness of unburned coal, a searing, scorching fire bit into my breast.

"It is well, Chambino," said Oscar Swenson, and his voice seemed to trail and die as he spoke. "You are branded."

LAY rigid for a long time after I knew he had left me. The gray of dawn was blotting out the moonlight before I dared to lift first one finger, then another.

Someone was sobbing in the room. the deep, tortured sobs of exhaustion. I listened a long time before I realized that the sobs were coming from my own vitals.

Gradually, the sobs slowed and ceased. I could move. I was alive. Perhaps, then, it had all been a horrible dream?

I felt something warm upon my breast. Blood! Involuntarily, I screamed the word. *Blood!*

With a wild leap, I was out of bed. I struck match after match before I managed to light a lamp—and then I staggered to the cracked mirror over the wash-stand.

God! it was true! I smeared away the few drops of coagulating blood, under my heart, and stood riveted by what I saw.

You will say a terrified cat clawed me and my fevered imagination did the rest. That is what I tried to tell myself. I tore my eyes away from the glass and saw the carcass of the cat sprawled in a corner, where I had flung her. I stood a long time, looking at the broken thing. Had these stiffened claws, then, made that dreadful scar? Had some malevolent intelligence guided the crazed beast to tear into my breast the perfect replica of . . . ?

I went back to my mirror, and stood before it with closed eyes for a long time. . . .

Then I looked again. On my breast, seared into the flesh, perfect in outline, unwavering, was the ace of spades! This was not the clawing of a frightened cat. This was the brand of Oscar Swenson.

Chambino's long, gaunt fingers were plucking at the covers under his chin in the inevitable gesture of a man doomed to die, but his eyes were burning.

"You do not believe?" he asked, "Look!" And he tore away the bed clothes, re-

vealing upon his breast a mark I swear I had not noticed when I examined him—a perfect image of the ace of spades, burned into the flesh.

Chambino saw the dawning horror in my eyes.

"Ah," he cried, "You are at last beginning to believe."

[I could not tell him that I had glimpsed what he could not see—the edges of that brand beneath his heart were turning black. I, a doctor, knew that death's decay could not attack his body until it was cold, and yet the impossible was there before my eyes.]

I turned away and he drew the covers up. "What about Oscar Swenson's mine?" I asked. "Did you never . . . ?"

"Ah, the mine," sighed Chambino. "No, it was never found—if it ever existed in a living world."

For days after that horrible night, Oscar Swenson left me in peace. I began to believe that I might escape. I made plans. There was the prospect of untold wealth before me. I sent two men I trusted out into the desert with the map I had purchased from Oscar Swenson with the ace of spades.

Weeks passed. Oscar Swenson returned to me but no word came from the men. I could not play cards. I lost, and lost heavily. Hearts, diamonds, clubs—all changed before my burning eyes—to the ace of spades.

A month passed—two months. Sometimes Oscar Swenson would leave me. Then my luck would change and I would be deliriously happy in the thought that my two men would return at any moment, laden with gold. They never returned—but Oscar Swenson did.

The two men were found long after I had fled Mino. Found in a sun bleached rattling heap—over a pack of cards, and the top card was that damned ace.

"Coincidence," you say. But was it a coincidence that when Oscar Swenson stood behind my shoulder, and he stood there often—was it coincidence that I always held the ace of spades—and lost?

WAS it a coincidence that—but I am tired, too tired to tell you how he followed me, relentlessly—remorselessly—from town to town, from game to game. Once I had been Lucky Chambino. Now I was Unlucky Chambino.

My losing streak never left me. There was no hope. I was growing old. And the periods when Oscar Swenson abandoned me, to go God knows where, grew fewer and

fewer. There had been a time when to realize he was not there was a blessed relief—a chance for hope. Now the days and nights when I was alone were long, agonizing hours of dread.

And always, I bore that terrible scar upon my breast. It held a sinister fascination for me. I would go for days, refusing to concede its existence, but then would come the inescapable moment when I must see it.

It was so with Oscar Swenson. I would defy him—deny him—the living dead man. I would tell myself he was not, and never had been. Then after summoning enough courage I would gamble. I would stake my small all—and lose. Because Oscar Swenson was standing at my shoulder.

I tried everything. I put my money in banks. They failed. I opened bars, and was burned out. I raised wheat, only to have it ruined by rust. I bought land, to find it under water. Then I gave up. I quit cold. I lost my nerve entirely. I sank lower and lower. . . .

Well, you know the rest. I was picked up on the street as a vagrant. I was starving, so they sent me here to the hospital. You were good to me, fed me, and I regained some of my lost strength. I was bothered no longer by the ghost of Oscar Swenson. I had some faint glimmer of hope, and thought that by now I had suffered enough, and that the curse was at last to be lifted.

Then some devil prompted me to ask for a deck of cards to pass the time away. That was the end. Swenson's ghost has come here every night and haunted me. That's the secret of my troubled sleepless nights. You thought it was the drains under the floor that made this room so dank, so cold; that caused the peculiar flat, dead odor. No, I tell you, *no!* That is the ghost of Oscar Swenson!

As I lay here to-night, I dreaded the fearful hours ahead. If Swenson came, with his mocking laugh, and revengeful eyes, I knew that I should go mad. And greater even than the fear of death, was the fear of insanity.

I collected my shattered faculties and came to a decision. I decided to gamble with death.

The fiend could undoubtedly read my mind, for even as I was formulating my plans, the preliminary gray luminous film that I had come to abhor, materialized. And there swayed Swenson, a mocking sar-

donic grin upon his ashen, lifeless lips.

With a determined effort I refrained from screaming, and spoke.

"Swenson," I said. "I'll gamble with you. I'll play a game of solitaire. If I get it out, you must swear to leave me forever. If I lose, I'll kill myself and join you."

The specter's lips contorted horribly.

"Yes, gamble," he said, in a low husky voice that seemed weighted with the evil of the ages. "Gamble, Chambino, for the last time. Yet all your skill, dexterity and cheating will be of no avail."

"I'll play it straight," I answered. "Do you agree to the terms? My life if I lose. Freedom from you if I win?"

His eyes glowed like dying embers.

"Agreed," he said in that throaty whisper. "But, first, do as I say. The attendants are at dinner. The medicine room is unlocked. Go there. On the second shelf as you enter, you will find a bottle of oxalic acid. Take it, then play. If you win, hurl it out the window and be free. If you lose, drink it—and our score will be settled."

The apparition blended slowly into the whiteness of the wall and was gone.

A moment I waited, fighting for breath. Then I rose and went to the medical room. As Swenson had said, there on the second shelf reposed the bottle. I took it and returned to my bed. Placing the small hospital table next to me, I riffled the cards slowly, and counted them, to make sure the deck was complete. Fifty-two. I shuffled. I laid the cards down, and turned to adjust the lamp. When I faced the table again, I stared in amazement. The cards had been cut. In place of the one pile I had left, were two smaller ones. *The ghost of Oscar Swenson had cut the cards!*

Fighting my jumpy nerves, I proceeded to deal the seven cards for solitaire. Slowly and clumsily, like the veriest tyro, I, Fernando Chambino, played my last game—with death.

At first my heart beat high with anticipation. The chances of winning seemed close to even. I played on, slowly, cautiously—overlooking nothing. But at last the spades were my undoing. The deuce, trey and others were at hand waiting to be played. But that grim unlucky ace had not turned up. As I played the last card, I trembled. It was the six of spades—useless without that ace!

I had played with death and lost—I flung the cards on the table and picked up the

bottle. Oscar Swenson had won at last.

Somehow, I was quite calm. I accepted death, knowing full well that it offered me a peace that I had not known on earth for twenty years—ever since that memorable night when I had cheated Swenson. I lifted the bottle to my lips, and drank deeply. Then I relaxed on my pillow, gazing at the cards while I tried to make my peace with God.

Somehow I felt surcease, ease and a sense of triumph. The ace of spades could not cheat me of death. For once I had overcome that dread symbol. As a final gesture, I reached over the table, intending to tear the card into a thousand pieces before I died.

I turned up the cards that were still face down—then gazed, thunderstruck. *The ace of spades was not there.* I counted the cards—fifty-one. The ace was missing.

HE cheated me! *He cheated me,* I tell you! Just as I had cheated him twenty years ago. He took that ace, knowing it was impossible for me to win without it. I cursed him and raved, but it was too late. I knew, even before I sent for you.

You think this is the raving of a madman—of a man who is dying and whose

nerve is gone. Very well. Count those cards. Count them before I die. For when I am gone, he will replace that ace. Count them, I say!

CHAMBINO half sat up, wild-eyed—the picture of a dying lunatic. More to humor a dying man, than because I took stock in the fantastic story, I picked up the cards and counted. There were fifty-one, with the ace of spades missing.

"See, I was right! Do you believe me?" he gasped.

"You were right, Chambino," I agreed, making the mental reservation that the ace had dropped on the floor during his clumsy deal.

He sank back on the pillow.

"I'm trying to die like a gambler, Doc," he said huskily. "Trying to die——"

His voice broke off in a horrible rasp, and he fell back on the pillow. I leaned over and put my hand to his heart. It was still.

Before I could straighten up, I was suddenly aware of a swift chill in the room. Apprehensively, I turned around. My eye fell on the cards. There, face up on the table, where, I will swear it had not been two minutes before lay *the ace of spades!*