

U N K N O W N W O R L D S

Contents for February, 1943, Vol. VI, No. 5

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Illustrations by: Cartier, M. Isip, Kolliker, Kramer and Orban.

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GUARDIAN

By Michael Corbin

● The fellow with the unlighted cigarette—the dawdling pedestrian who makes you stop—or the farmhand by the roadside might be yours. But you'd never know, naturally.

Illustrated by M. Ielp

INTEROFFICE COMMUNICATION

To—Secretary, Recording Office
From No.—1,234,567,890,123
Rank—Guardian Angel
Subject—Resignation
Remarks—See Below

I should have followed my hunch and gone into the Harp & Halo Corps when I re-enlisted this time. But some of the other Guardians said this was a fairly soft touch, this watching over a man till the Sands & Time department sends out his Day-is-done order.

Well, the job is about what I expected, and I handled my first assignment discreetly. Look at my card; you'll see.

So I can't see any reason for my suspension—"pending an investigation." And the semiofficial suggestion that I resign and be forgiven smells like office politics to me.

Every time you turn your back around here, you're likely to get a flaming sword between your shoulder blades.

I'm not going to resign, even if I get Hell for it. For I seem to detect the fine angelic hand of Mike in this affair. Mike isn't his real name, of course, which is secret. And I don't know his number, but you can look it up on my record sheet—he scouted that Sodom and Gomorrah job with me, and grandstanded a little too much, if you ask me.

I bawled him out for blinding those men so publicly, and that was the start of the break between us. Confidentially, I think he's turning the heat on me because of that and one other brush with me; he's only using the J. Bonnie Camber case as a peg to hang his accusations on.

There was no need for a trouble-shooter on that case. J. Bonnie was no more than five minutes late—look it up—but Mike came soaring in with lightning in both eyes to see what was holding up the parade.

Oh, I'm for efficiency; don't get me wrong. I

know that Receiving is overloaded these days, and if they fall behind schedule there's Hell to pay. But we've built up a reserve, and a few small payments won't hurt us any. I claim a slight loss was justifiable where Bonnie Camber was concerned.

Anyway, speaking of efficiency, Mike himself hasn't such a hot score. Look up the record. You'll find that he was three weeks late in delivering a message to Daniel, and was suspended for dallying with the King of Persia. You'll also see that I was assigned to see the job through, and that I was right on the dot when it came to muzzling those big cats.

You can see that, since he already disliked me for the incident at Lot's, he would probably swear a private revenge because I finished what he messed up by playing around the Persian court. Now he's trying to get even. Well, I'm going to give him a run for his manna.

Anyway, I shouldn't have been assigned to J. Bonnie in the first place. A green relief Guardian has no business around a broken-down newspaperman. Especially when he's working on a political weekly on the brink of a local election.

Oh, I followed regulations. You'll see on my report that I turned into a cop and took him home when he got drunk and lost. And I gave him that puncture when he was driving Hell-bent down that black country road; I was the yokel who helped him change the tire and told him about the bridge that was out, fifty yards ahead.

But how could I know what to do about Ellen? We've got nothing like her around here. I had to do what I thought was best—no, I'll be honest. I had to do what I did, but I believe it was best. Five minutes aren't so important, when you've got all eternity to make 'em up.

Ellen. Yes, Ellen.

"Princess." Bonnie would say to her every morning. "I have brought you a token."

He'd take his jaunty hat off his gray head and sweep it low as he handed her a flower, or what-



ever. As well as she could at the switchboard, she'd curtsy.

It was a game, see? A game, but it meant a lot to both. They looked forward to it each morning. And all the other Guardians who happened to be in the lobby at the time would glow a little.

Not so the district supervisor for the Adversary. He made that building a sort of headquarters, and his road crew reported to him there. When Bonnie and Ellen put on their little act each morning, he'd sneer at them and at the tender smiles of humans and Guardians present.

I got tired of his attitude, and quick. I zipped over to his lair just above the building entrance on the sixth morning.

"Listen, Snake-puss," I said, "don't get any ideas about them, see?"

He looked me over as if I were a sour harp string.

"You're new here?"

"But mighty vigilant, and if you pull anything fancy, I'll smite you. Look it up in the Code. You'll find I have a right."

"I'm not planning anything . . . uh, fancy, as you say."

"No? Listen, I've seen your kind before. Always figuring, waiting for a chance to do evil. I'm warning you, lay off!"

He seemed cowed. "Yes, your brightness."

Now maybe I shot my mouth off too much, but I don't think so. You know how the Adversaries are about a relief Guardian; they try to snatch his ward away by any means. Maybe if I hadn't said

anything to the supervisor, the word to get Bonnie would have been delayed somewhat. But, as I say, I don't believe it.

Anyway, I felt able to handle the situation—nothing cocky in my attitude, you understand, nothing of the greenhorn throwing his wings around. I was confident, that's all, and I didn't give the supervisor another thought at the time. Bonnie had troubles enough to keep me fluttering.

He had photostatic proof that the incumbent district attorney, one Rob Hoke, had accepted a bribe to suppress embezzlement charges against a local broker, and that Hoke took a regular cut of the vice juice, which was split three ways between the district attorney, the chief of police and the mayor.

Bonnie had his colors on a young lawyer, opposing the incumbent D. A., and was intending to print his proof of Hoke's malfeasance in the final issue of his paper, two days before election. He had showed the stuff to the young lawyer's campaign manager, Harry Lane, who was also Ellen's fiancé, and they both felt that the publication would put the election on ice.

Harry had promoted funds to blanket the city with this issue of Bonnie's paper, and had contracted for distribution which would lay a copy on every doorstep in the county. Bonnie was to make a nice profit, and was happy about it until the first phone call came from Hoke's office, five days before election.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Rob," Bonnie said into his phone after the preliminaries were over. He listened, and his office staff—two reporters and an office girl—stopped work at the word "Rob."

"Wait a minute, you rancid tub of grease," Bonnie said quietly, after a few minutes, "of course I'm opposing you. My personal opinion is that you are a treacherous, lecherous, remorseless, kindless villain, and I'll print any facts about you I can get. Libel is my worry, not yours. But as for certain documents at which you so cautiously hint, I don't know anything about them."

He hung up, said to the office girl, "I won't be back today," and walked out. At the switchboard, he paused only long enough to ask Ellen to have dinner with him that evening if Harry Lane was busy enough to leave her stranded. She crinkled blue eyes at him, accepted, and he left the building.

As we passed through the entrance, I saw the supervisor of the Adversary working on a graph. I played a hunch and zoomed off to check. As I suspected, a runaway truck was scheduled to rip through the first intersection Bonnie was to cross, and the supervisor had been plotting collision courses so that the paths of the truck and Bonnie would meet.

My move was obvious, of course. I changed into

a man with a cigarette in his mouth, waited at the corner for Bonnie, and asked him for a match. He paused, fumbled in his pocket for a second, and struck it for me.

The wind from the truck blew out the match as the big machine swooshed through the red light, and I knew that the set-up was made for Bonnie alone, for the truck touched nobody and the driver got it in hand immediately. A woman screamed, but nobody was hurt.

Well, it was all right with me that the Adversaries were gunning for my ward. I like situations that keep me up on my wing tips. All the other Guardians in the neighborhood began passing the word that a private war was on and to help me in every way.

Bonnie went to his ramshackle hotel, took the documents out of his ragged mattress, and had them put in the hotel safe. Then he telephoned the young lawyer who was the candidate for the office of district attorney.

After some chitchat, Bonnie asked: "Does anybody know about our deal who would sell you out? . . . Well, the D. A. has wind of the papers I hold, and he got the information somewhere. . . . Yes, he would definitely pay high for such knowledge. His office is a rich plum, a plum that's always ripe. Who knows about the papers aside from you and me? . . . I see. Well, Harry wouldn't sell out. . . . Yes, the papers are in a safe place. . . . Yes, I'll be careful."

As he hung up, a knock shook his door.

Two big men were there, dressed in plain business suits and dark hats. One of their Guardians told me that they were attached to the district attorney's office. Bonnie knew them, called the brown-eyed husky Al, and the slate-eyed, marble-faced hulk was called Jerry.

"What do you want?" Bonnie asked.

Al looked down at him. "A little talk, Bonnie, a little talk."

"I don't want you in here. You can't come in."

Al placed his large palm in Bonnie's face and walked inside, sort of trundling Bonnie ahead of him. "Lock the door, Jerry," Al said.

Bonnie moved from behind Al's hand, sat on the bed and watched Jerry pocket the key. "What does Hoke want from me, Al?"

"Some papers, Bonnie, a few papers."

"I haven't any papers."

Jerry broke in. "We're wastin' time. You can take off your cheaters, Bonnie."

"Wait, Jerry," Al said, "wait. Let's do this like gentlemen. Give us the papers, Bonnie, and you won't be hurt too much."

"I tell you, I don't know anything about any papers."

Al sighed. "Very well. Take off your glasses, Bonnie." Bonnie laid his spectacles on the dresser.

"Now the shirt, Bonnie," Al said.

When Bonnie had bared his thin torso, Jerry hit him under the heart with a small, leather sap filled with shot. Bonnie winced, gasped, but didn't cry out. Jerry hit him again, and Bonnie groaned.

"Muzzle him," Al directed, and Jerry put a strip of adhesive across Bonnie's mouth. "When you are ready to talk, Bonnie," Al continued, "nod your head. All right, Jerry, go on."

Jerry hit Bonnie again under the heart, then shifted his attack. He was slow and deliberate, never striking hard enough to crack a rib, and never fast enough to work up a sweat. He marked each of Bonnie's ribs with a dark bruise, pounded him over the kidneys, and used the heart blow repeatedly.

When Bonnie passed out the first time, Al brought a glass of water from the bathroom and tossed it in Bonnie's face. It revived Bonnie enough so that he rolled off the bed to the floor, where he passed out again, and Al drew another glass of water.

"Ready to tell us now, Bonnie, ready?"

Bonnie moved his head without opening his eyes. No.

Jerry went to work on him again, striking spots as yet uncolored by bruises. Bonnie lasted only a few strokes this time, and had to be revived again.

Twice more this was repeated, when Al said, "That's enough for today. We don't want to kill him."

I smiled to myself at this. I wouldn't have let them kill him; his order hadn't come out yet.

"We'll see you again tomorrow, Bonnie," Al said. "Don't try to leave town."

Bonnie lay still for a long time before he had strength enough to pull the tape off his mouth. Then he crawled into the bathroom, took off all his clothes but his shoes, which were beyond his strength, and struggled into the tub.

After he had soaked a couple of hours, he was shaky but able to stand. He got on some clothes, took a revolver from his bureau drawer. He shoved this down his belt, buttoned his coat over it, and went downstairs, one painful slow step at a time, his face as gray as his hair.

He got his papers from the hotel safe, his car from the garage, and started looking for Harry Lane. I scouted ahead, remembering the Adversaries were after him, and was able to avert one planned disaster by wandering in front of him as a pedestrian. He slowed to let me cross, and another car roared across the intersection just ahead of him.

I don't think this will be brought up against me on grounds that I was too zealous, but if it is, I'd like to point out that they were trying to kill him. I cited that business in the hotel room to show that I wasn't horning into something

that was none of my affair. But the Adversaries' campaign was different; they wanted his blood. I didn't like to take a chance on a wreck that might only maim him but, on the other hand, might kill him before his order came out.

He didn't find Harry Lane, and in due time he picked up Ellen for their dinner date. He was himself again as soon as she was in the car—sardonic, overelaborately courteous. They had a couple of cocktails at a quiet bar before dinner in a restaurant all crystal and linen. Over coffee and port, Ellen sounded a new note in the conversation.

"Harry called me to find where you were, Bonnie. I told him to try your hotel. Did he reach you?"

Bonnie looked at her, his eyes thoughtful behind glasses as they touched on her smooth black hair, light eyes, blue dinner dress. "In a way, he did," Bonnie said, "though not in person. I've looked for him all afternoon. Do you know where he is?"

"That's what I want to tell you."

She stared at her hands while a waiter came and refilled their wine glasses.

"He was called out of town, Bonnie, until after election. On business. I asked him what about you, and the scheme you had together. He said he didn't think you would deliver, but if you did, you could handle it yourself. What does that mean?"

Bonnie's mouth had a bitter droop. "Gather ye plums while ye may. From the tone of your voice, Princess, I'd say you had something else to tell. Go on."

"Yes. He said that if he heard the right kind of news, he'd come into a comfortable sum and a good job. He asked me to set a date for the wedding. What shall I tell him, Bonnie?"

He blinked across the table at her. "Why ask me?"

She made an impatient motion with her head. "We don't have to waste words. I know how you feel about me, you know how I feel about you. What shall I tell him?"

"What do you want to tell him, Princess?"

"I don't know," Ellen said. "I always understood it was impossible to love two persons at once, but I've made a lie out of that. I can't have you both. I leave it to you."

"Child, I'm old enough to be your father."

She made another impatient movement with her smooth shoulders. "That has nothing to do with it."

"Ah, but it has. In fifteen years, you'll be at the top of your prime and I'll be an old man with a child bride. A disparity in age becomes more important as time lurches on."

"How do you know? You've never married."

"I observe the facts of life in others, Princess. What I should like to know is this. Exactly how do you feel about your Harry Lane?"

She thought about it for a while. "I'd say I'm *in* love with him. It's a kind of flame, different from the solid and comfortable love I feel for you."

"Then I advise you," Bonnie said, spacing his words, "to take the flame. By all means, take the flame. It will mean something, in later years, to have been shaken to the depths in your youth. I know." He paused, and a far look entered his eyes as he spoke in hushed tones. "Once I was a cub reporter on a New York daily, engaged to a girl, a girl something like you, Princess. She was forced to work. It was somewhat the same set-up that you and Harry have. One afternoon, a fire broke out in the shirt factory where she worked, on the fourth floor of a frame building. There was no outside fire escape on the building, and she,

among others, flung herself from the window. Those girls were impaled on the iron pickets of a fence, four floors below."

Ellen caught her breath, clenched her hands.

"I had caught one of the fire engines," Bonnie went on, huskily, "and I was in the crowd that watched them jump, one by one, on to the palings. She had no idea I was there, I'm sure, or she would have waved before she jumped. She couldn't have heard my voice above the snap and crackle of burning walls, the clang of fire bells, and the roar of the crowd. The point I'm trying to make, Princess, is that she and I knew that flame. But . . . she . . . jumped. If I had it to do over again, I'd make the same decision Harry has made. I'd forget ideals, and loyalty. I'd concentrate on life, and love the woman of my choice."

"Bonnie, darling," Ellen whispered.

They were quiet as they finished their wine. Bonnie signaled the waiter for more coffee, and



after it was poured, Ellen broke the silence with a puzzled question.

"What decision? That Harry made, what was it?"

Bonnie smiled slowly. "He decided that the flame was the thing, Princess. He is right. Maybe I wouldn't have done it the way he did, but who knows? Maybe I would. For you, I think so. I think I'd do anything for you, Princess."

He took from his pocket the Manila envelope containing the photostatic proof of the district attorney's malfeasance and handed it to Ellen.

"If Harry calls you, and I suspect he will, tell him I gave you this, and that I said he could come back. Tell him my paper isn't coming out."

"But I don't understand, Bonnie. What does it mean?"

"Never mind, Princess. It isn't important. And you take my car. I won't need it any more tonight. I'll pick it up in the morning."

"What are you going to do, Bonnie?"

"I'm going to call on a friend, Princess. It's an anonymous call, and I'll rent a plainer car than mine for the purpose."

"You sound so funny. You're not in trouble, or going to get in trouble, are you?"

"No. Run along, and thank you for the very high compliment you paid me."

After Ellen had gone, Bonnie went first to a rent-a-car lot and picked out an inconspicuous gray coupé. He insisted on a light towing chain being put in the luggage compartment, "in case I break down," he told the attendant.

He stopped at a bar, had a couple of drinks and cashed a small check. Then he filled up the gas tank and barreled out to what he discovered soon was a little country cottage where Al, the D. A.'s muscle man, lived.

Bonnie took the chain, folded it over his left arm, and went to the door. Al answered his ring, and Bonnie slugged him unconscious with his gun when Al opened the door. The big man fell back into his hallway with a crash that shook the whole house, and Bonnie waited tensely for the noise to arouse anyone who might be inside.

There was no sign of other occupants, so Bonnie lashed Al's hands with his belt and tied the thug's shoestrings together. He waited for the big man to recover.

Presently Al opened his eyes, and Bonnie said, "Ah, good evening. There were two of you this afternoon, and I'd have been insane to resist. Now the odds are more even. I'm going to beat you nearly to death, Al, with this chain. You see, I don't care whether it leaves permanent marks or not."

Al stared at the chain. "Aw, Bonnie, man, you can't do that! You'll kill me!"

"Oh, no, Al. I'll be careful on that point."

"But, Bonnie, listen! I had nothing against you personally. I was under orders. It wasn't my fault!"

"Yes, I know, Al. That's why I'm not going to kill you—quite. If I were you, I'd turn over. It'll be better to take this on your back. I'll try not to break your arms."

"Bonnie, I'll kill you for this."

"Yes, Al, I suppose so. But at least I'll get it out of my system."

"Bonnie, listen. Listen, Bonnie. We can make a deal. I'll—"

"Oh, shut up, Al," Bonnie said wearily. "I'd think no more of killing you than stamping on a spider. I'd think no more of dealing with you than with your boss, although maybe I did indirectly tonight. At any rate, you represent a certain type of scum that covers the surface of politics still in this country. Men elected to public office who become scavengers, feeding off the corruption of festering social sores. You, Al, are even worse than such men. You pander to them, you carry the spoils to them, you're a maggot stooge for a political vulture. Now turn over before I break your jaw with the end of this chain."

"Didn't you ever make a mistake, Bonnie?" Al asked.

"Yes. Many."

"Well, I made one once, see? And Hoke owns me, Bonnie. Owns me."

"Al, really I don't want to hit you in the face with this. Turn over."

"Bonnie, you'll cripple me for life!"

"Your body will match your mind, then."

"Bonnie, I'm going to be married. To a swell girl. Don't mark me up. I'm begging, Bonnie."

"You'll be a better man when I finish, Al. Better able to see somebody else's side of a question."

"After all, Bonnie, I never touched you today. It was Jerry beat you."

"Don't quibble, or I will kill you."

"You won't listen, Bonnie?"

"No."

"O. K., Bonnie. So help me, if it's the last thing I do, I'll get you for this. I'll kill you in little pieces, little strips—slow."

Al turned on his face, tensed himself, and Bonnie drew back his arm.

He held it. That bitter droop came back to his mouth.

"What good would it do?" he muttered. "What good would it do?"

He looped the chain over his arm again and went to the door. "You can get loose, Al, if you try hard enough."

"Bonnie, you're a white man," Al said, with a break in his voice. "Uh—God bless you, Bonnie!"

"A moot point," Bonnie said, and left.

As Bonnie hurled the rented car through the night, I swooped ahead to scout the road. That was when I found the bridge out, and I punctured his tire, then helped him change it, in the guise of a ranch hand, as I've said before. I told him about the bridge, directed him to a detour, and we buzzed into town without mishap.

He returned the car, took back his deposit, and retired to a bar. Here he settled down to some serious drinking.

This was not like other nights. He didn't look around for cronies, he didn't offer to buy drinks. He sat solitary in a corner, paid no heed to the juke box down whose throat tinkled a trickle of nickels. He ordered drinks four at a clip, and drank them grimly.

Once he raised his glass to a calendar on which was the word "Princess."

An occasional acquaintance or friend would stop at his table and speak, but Bonnie never looked once at any of them. He'd simply raise his hand to their greeting, keep his eyes on his glass. Mostly, he kept his glass empty.

One lean man with a Texas accent returned now and again. "Bonnie," he'd say. "Leave me buy yuh a drink, pal. It's right discouragin' to see yuh mopin' heah by yo' lonesome. Leave me buy yuh a drink, Bonnie."

"Go away, Tex," Bonnie would say, not looking up.

"Bettah give in, Bonnie. 'M gonna buy yuh a drink fo' the evenin's ovah."

"Go away, Tex. Tomorrow."

"Nope. Tonight, Bonnie. Sometime tonight."

Then Tex would serpentine back to the crowd at the bar, and Bonnie continued his solitary drinking. When he had had some fourteen drinks, he got glassily but steadily to his feet and went out.

"'M gonna buy yuh a drink, Bonnie," Tex shouted after him. "Tonight."

Bonnie stopped at a liquor store, bought two quarts of whiskey, and went to his hotel. He undressed partially, and began to do some real drinking.

After this had continued for some time, a Cherub came in with Bonnie's Day-is-done order from the Sands & Time Department. He gave it to me, and told me about situations here and there, and left.

I looked at the order. In an hour, Bonnie was to die. Traffic victim. There were no details, of course. I wondered just how he was going to die in traffic, when he had nearly enough liquor in him to kill him. If he drank much longer, it would surely kill him.

He continued to drink, and in about forty-five minutes I heard heavy and uncertain feet groping up the stairs. A voice started shouting, from the top of the stairway, "'M gonna buy yuh a drink, Bonnie!"

I zipped outside. It was Tex, and his Guardian told me the set-up. Tex was to persuade Bonnie to come out, and a car was to run him down.

Now I know that there's a Plan, that there's a reason for each death, but there was a point in this situation that I didn't like. I know I was wrong in not liking it. I know we are not to have any emotions. We are simply to carry out our job to the best of our ability.

But we are also to use our own judgment in emergencies. I'd used mine several times on this day, and had come out all right. Well, I used it again.

I changed to a cop again. "What do you want?" I asked Tex.

He goggled at me. "Want m' fr'en' Bonnie, officah."

"Go away," I said. "This is a stake-out. Beat it, or I'll run you in."

Tex's Guardian looked back at me in astonishment as Tex clumped downstairs. I turned into my normal self again, and watched Bonnie continue to guzzle the whiskey. His face was puffed and swollen, his torso was a mass of bruises. He was barely able to hold himself in a chair.

He poured a full water glass, halfway down the second quart, and tossed it off. He repeated this, and lost consciousness.

He was dying, but he took longer than I thought. His time arrived, was three minutes overtime, and he still breathed.

Mike entered at this point, and told me he was trouble-shooting. "Let me see his order," Mike said.

He looked it over. He looked at me.

"So you finally slipped up," he said. "I'll report this."

"Do," I said. "Anyway, he's gone."

Bonnie was dead.

"Five minutes late," Mike said. "For your sake, I hope you can explain it to the board."

Mike flipped off, and there was nothing more to keep me, but I stayed. The Cherub had told me Ellen was on her way.

I heard her feet rattle up the stairs and patter over to the door. She burst in, full of the phone call from Harry which the Cherub had told me about, the news that he had decided to stick with his candidate despite pressure and offers of security from the D. A.

"Bonnie, I—" She stopped, seeing his bruised body and swollen face. She knew he was dead. Nobody could mistake it. "Oh, Bonnie!" she said, dropping on her knees beside him. "Bonnie, darling!"

Well, I came away then, and here I am. In looking back over this, I see I was guilty of a technical breach. So I'll resign if that's the way you want it. I'll give this to a Cherub and he'll turn it in, as soon as I explain one more point.

I'm not squeamish. You know that. You'll remember how I took care of two squads of soldiers when King Ahaziah was putting the arm on Elijah. It wouldn't have bothered me if Bonnie had died under the wheels of a car. I know it doesn't matter which way they die, because of what happens next. But the Adversaries had no business butting in.

When the Cherub told me that they had arranged for Ellen to run over him with his own car, I just couldn't send him out there. I just couldn't.

THE END.