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He said, "This is it. Fork it over gents. . . ."



Mind Over Mayhem

If somebody threatened you with a bottle of scotch—and all you had to defend yourself with was a gun, would you ask—as did Sam—for a hole in the head?

THE OTHERS had straggled out one by one and I was the only remaining customer. The bartender drifted down and wiped the bar in front of me listlessly, and yawned.

"Why the hell don't you go home, Jerry?" he asked conversationally.

I put the tabloid I'd been glancing at

to one side and grinned at him. "Haven't got a home, Sam; just a hotel room with four walls and a bed and a chair or two and a couple hundred pocket books. I'd rather sit here and look at you."

He leaned on the bar before me and said, "You oughta get married, Jerry. Why don't you ask that girl . . . what was

● **By Mack Reynolds** ●

her name? The blonde, pretty little girl."
"Frances."

"Yeah, that's right. Frances. Why don't you ask her to marry you?"

I twisted my glass on the bar, lifted it over to a new spot, twisted it again and then again, making small wet circles.

"I did," I said. "A couple of months ago I asked her, 'Why don't we get married, Frances?'"

"Well, what'd she say?" Sam asked, yawning again.

"She just laughed and said, 'Who'd have either of us, Jerry?'"

Sam snorted. "I've heard that one before."

"It's almost two o'clock. You can't expect me to be original this time of the night."

A guy came in and took a stool two down from me and Sam walked over to him.

"Only fifteen minutes to go," Sam said. "What'll it be?"

"Bourbon," the stranger told him. "You gents like to have one with me?"

Usually the guy who comes into a bar the last few minutes before closing has already been drinking pretty heavy; he's been put out of a place that shuts up early and he's looking for that last drink that's suddenly become so important. This guy was an exception; he was cold sober. About thirty, which makes him a few years younger than me and maybe twenty years younger than Sam, he was neatly dressed and had an air of sharpness that seemed out of place this time of night.

"Thanks," I told him. "I could use another beer."

Sam poured the stranger's whiskey, drew my beer and then got himself a glass of vermouth, which is the only stuff I've ever seen Sam drink.

Sam said, "*Prosit.*"

The stranger said, "*Skool.*"

I said, "Here's how," and we all started working on our drinks.

I said something about the weather and they both agreed and everybody lapsed into silence. After a minute or two, the stranger started looking at the tabloid I'd discarded.

Finally he laughed and said, "Did you see this item about the old lady that socked some punk who was trying to hold up her liquor store? She slugged him with a bottle of Scotch."

Sam said, "Did it break the bottle? She would've saved money if she'd used something cheaper."

"Every once in a while you read something like that," I said. "That old doll must be a terror. I'd hate to be her old man."

The stranger finished off his drink and ordered another. Sam glanced up at the clock, saw we had time, and said this one was on him. I had another beer.

"The guy was an amateur," the stranger said. "If he'd had any sense, he wouldn't have tried anything on the old lady."

"Hell," I said, "How'd he know, when he pulled the gun on her, that she was going to haul off and conk him with a bottle? It was just one of life's little surprises."

"He should've sized her up before pulling the caper. If he'd taken his time, he could've seen she was the type that'd blow her top and start screaming, or throwing things or some such. Five minutes of analyzing her character and he would've seen he'd better go somewhere else."

"Maybe you're right," Sam said argumentatively, "but how would he go about analyzing her character in just the few minutes time he'd have? He couldn't hang around the store very long or it'd look suspicious and she'd be calling for the cops."

"You wouldn't need very long," the stranger told him. "You can size a person up in just a few minutes by the way they walk and talk and by their gestures—that sort of stuff."

I grinned. "Okay. Size me up. If you were analyzing my character, would you go ahead and stick me up or not?"

HE SMILED back. "Sure I would. You're the easy going type. Even if you had much money on you, and you probably never have, you wouldn't think it was worth taking a chance on getting yourself killed."

Sam grunted, "That sounds like Jerry, all right. How about me?"

The stranger flicked his hand almost disdainfully. "You're easy. I'd take a chance on you right off the bat. You'd be scared stiff at the first sight of a gun."

The old boy was irritated. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"It's the little things I watch," the stranger said. "Like the fact that you crook your little finger when you pick up your glass. A thing like that tells a lot."

Sam had been just about ready to take a sip from his vermouth. Sure enough, the little finger was crooked. It looked sort of ridiculous on the part of a big burly guy like Sam.

Sam snorted.

The easy-going smile left the stranger's face. He put his right hand in a pocket and brought out a snub-nosed revolver.

His voice was chilly now. "Let's try the experiment out," he said. "This is it. Fork it over, gents."

I said, "I'll be damned," and got my hands up in a hurry. "Take it easy, buddy—sometimes those things go off," I told him nervously.

He smiled a little, contemptuous smile at me and wagged the gun at Sam. "You too, big boy," he snapped. "Put 'em up."

Sam stood there, his two beefy red hands on the bar, and stared blankly at the gunman for a long moment. Finally he gave a deep sigh, and began to make his way around the end of the bar.

"Hold it," the stranger said sharply. "Get back to that cash register and—"

"In your hat," Sam said, coming toward him.

"Take it easy, Sam!" I warned him shrilly, expecting to hear the gun's roar at any split second.

But he kept advancing.

A muscle was twitching in the gunman's neck; his finger began to tighten on the trigger. "You're asking for it," he snarled.

"And over your ears," Sam said, and reached out suddenly and hit the guy sharply across the wrist with the edge of his hand. The gun dropped to the floor, and Sam stooped quickly and scooped it up with his left hand.

"Call a cop, Jerry," Sam told me softly, keeping the gunman covered. He made his way around the end of the bar again, and took his old place.

I went down to the other end of the room, where Sam has a pay phone booth, and shakily made the call.

By the time I came back I was boiling, I was so mad. "You conceited crackpot," I snapped at Sam. "Just because he said you'd be yellow in an emergency, you didn't have to show off like that."

The gunman had slumped back onto a stool, perspiration standing out heavily on his forehead. He started to say something, but then shut up.

Sam shrugged. "There wasn't any danger of his shooting. Any guy with enough brains to figure out that character analysis stunt before pulling his stickups has too much sense to kill a man. He wouldn't want to risk a murder rap. As it is, he'll only get sent up for a year or so."

He picked up his vermouth glass and finished his drink. I noticed that he still crooked his little finger. He saw my eyes on it and grinned wryly. He held it out so that I could see a small white scar running along the knuckle.

"Piece of shell fragment creased it back during the first war. Haven't been able to bend that finger since," he said.