



BLACK MASK

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K. S. WHITE, Editor

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Cover painted for Black Mask by Peter Stevens

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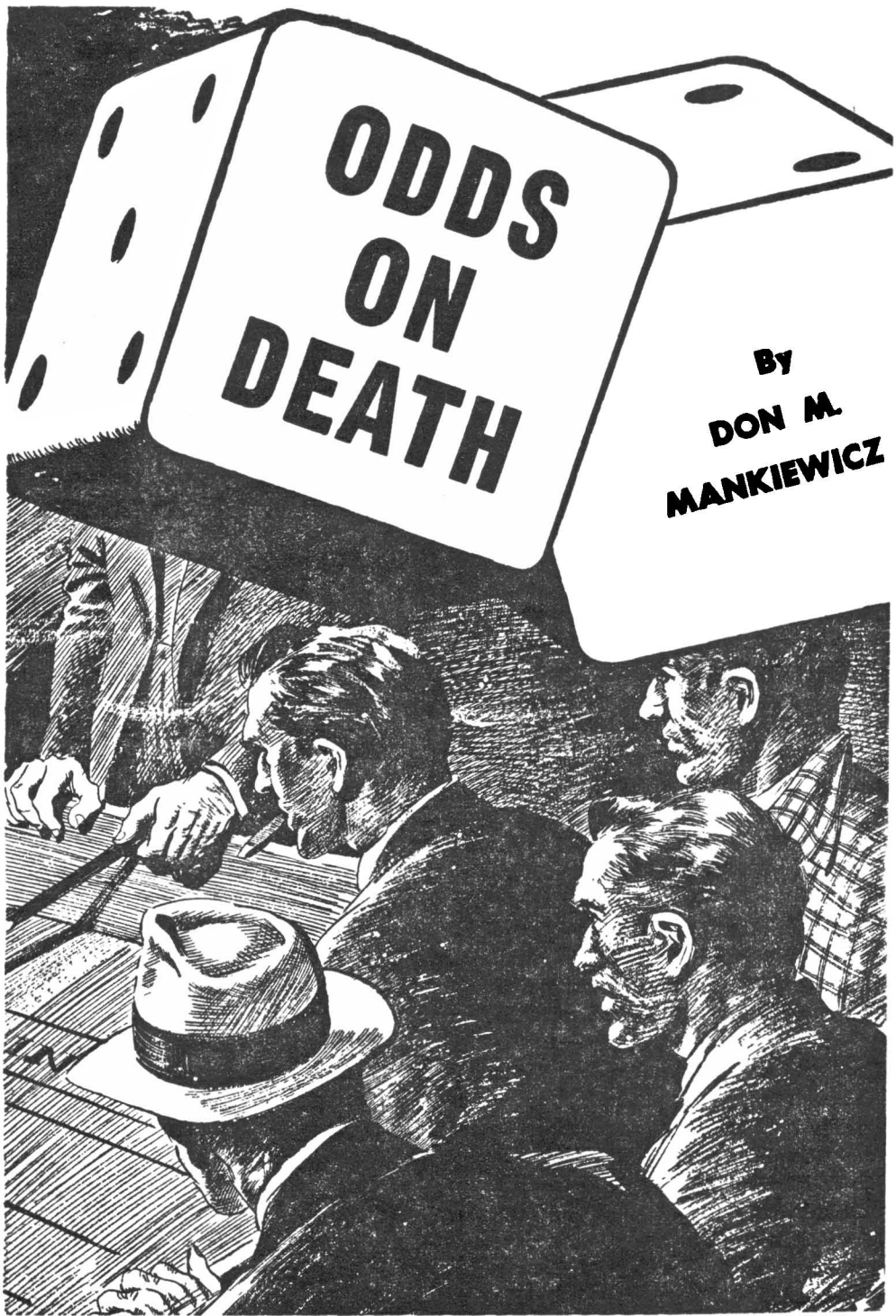
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John started shaking the dice again and then he stopped.



NOW that you mention it, chum, it is kind of an odd decoration at that. Not the kind of thing you'd expect to find hanging on the wall back of a bar, particularly in a high-class place like this. Looks like a kid's cane to you, huh? I guess you've led a

sheltered life, son. That's a dice stick. Every house-run crap game in the world has a stickman, and just about every stickman uses a curved stick like that to return the dice to the shooter between rolls. Most of them are a little tricky, too, like that one there. They don't al-



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ways return the same dice they pick up —if you get what I mean.

That stick was given to me by my old man. He'd carried it all over the world with him, like a good mechanic might carry a set of fine end-wrenches or a special pair of calipers that he liked. My dad was a pro, same as I was. He'd handled the sticks at dice tables in Caliente, Reno, Saratoga, Florida, Hot Springs, and even at some of the famous European gambling houses along the Riviera. He had a reputation for honesty that would get him a job with any gambling joint in the world. That may sound a little odd to you, Mac, but a guy who wants to work at a dice table had better be honest, even if his job is switching the dice back and forth so the house doesn't get hit. What I mean by that is, the boss has to know that his employees are all working for him; it'd be awfully easy for a stickman to get tied up with somebody from the outside and make a mistake on purpose with those dice some time. Once, that is. Never twice.

I DON'T know why I should be telling you the story of my life like this, mister, but you asked about the stick, and I guess you'll stop me if I'm boring you. Well, when Dad got along in years to the point where it hurt him to stand up all night, he wasn't like most stickmen. He'd saved his money. And he quit. You know, like those fellows you read about in the insurance ads in the magazines, that go off to some cabin in the mountains and spend all their time fishing. Well, that's what my old man did; just quit and bought a shack out near Pike's Peak and there, except for a Christmas card every year, I haven't heard from him since. At the time he quit, we were both working as stickmen at Rocco's, up the street. You ever been there? Well, don't bother. If

you ever feel like going there for an evening's pleasure, as the fellow says, just mail Rocco your money. That way you won't be pushed around and have to smell all the cigar smoke. And you got just as good a chance to win.

What I mean by that is, Rocco's joint is just as crooked as he is, which is the same as to say nothing is left to chance. I have an idea that was one of the things that got my old man to quit, Rocco's being such a crooked house, and him being too old to go traipsing around the country looking for a better job. When he quit, Dad gave me that stick and before he left for the mountains he gave me a quick course in how to operate it. There wasn't anything I couldn't do with that stick. The way it worked is this: a fellow would come in and start shooting. At the start of his roll he got a whole basket of Rocco's dice, everyone of them honest, to pick from. Any two dice in the basket that he liked, those were the dice he used. Well, as long as he kept shooting for reasonable stakes, he'd keep those dice. Every time he'd shoot, I'd slide the dice back to him with the stick, and he'd roll them out again. The house would be taking its percentage out of the side bets, the guy would win-a-little-lose-a-little, and everybody would be happy, particularly Rocco and me.

That's the way things usually go at any crap table. The bets fairly even, no arguments, honest dice, pass, miss, pass, and the percentage gradually dragging all the money out of everybody's pockets.

But there are emergencies that do come up every now and then. Some guy will get hot and start letting his bets ride—which means he doubles his money with every pass he makes. When somebody starts doing that, that's when Rocco gets glad I've got my stick and know how to use it. You see, if a guy does let his money ride, and if he only

gets fairly hot, let's say he makes eleven passes. Now, on that twelfth roll he's shooting two thousand and some dollars *for every dollar he started with*. What we do when this happens is pretty simple, and, while it's not foolproof, it very rarely goes wrong.

We give the guy his perfectly honest dice that he's been shooting with all along for his first throw. If he comes out right there on one roll—if he sevens or elevens, that is—he's a winner and we've got to hope he tries it again. He may crap out on that one roll, too, that is, he may hit two, three, or twelve, and lose right there but most likely he'll catch a point, that is, he'll roll four, five, six, eight, nine, or ten. And then he's got to make his point, roll it again before he rolls a seven, and the percentages say he's not likely to do it. That's why even an honest crap table (if there is such a thing), would make money. But percentage doesn't say he can't make or he won't do it, just that he's not likely to do it. That stick up on the wall there, Mac, that's what says he can't do it. To put it as simply as I can, that stick has a little slot in it, a kind of panel, and when I grab my end of the stick a little tighter than usual, that panel gets all loose and wobbly. When I push the dice with the stick they just wander in back of the panel and some other dice come flying out about a quarter inch further up the stick. Sure it's tough to make a stick like that, but it's tough to make a car, or a watch, or a hat that rabbits can hide in. It's hard to operate a stick like that and not get caught at it, too, and that's why Rocco was paying me a hundred and a quarter a week to push the dice back and forth on his table—and this was some years ago when a hundred and a quarter was pretty good money. I won't bore you with a lot of details about those other dice, chum. They were made in Minneapolis, and to put it

very, very, simply, they couldn't come up anything but seven.

You get the picture now, don't you, friend? I mean here's this sucker, all set to try to make his eight or nine or whatever for a couple of thousand bucks, and here he is shaking these dice that can't come up anything but seven. Of course, real smart gamblers used to notice that nobody ever seemed to make a good score on the crap table, and most of the big money boys stayed off it. But that didn't bother Rocco; there were plenty of guys in town that figured they could beat that table, and they used to contribute enough to pay my wages and leave the house with a handsome profit.

Every time a guy would miss out on his big roll, whether he did it because his luck was lousy or with some help from my old man's stick, Rocco would look at him real sad and say: "Looks like you lose your dough, son. Two rolls, no coffee." "Two rolls, no coffee" always struck me as a pretty terrible pun, but guys who are winning in crap games all over the world think it's about the wittiest remark ever made.

The guy Rocco said "Two rolls, no coffee" to oftenest was a fellow named Perino. "Patsy" Perino they used to call him. Rocco made that nickname up because he said Perino was the biggest Patsy that ever was, and the tag sort of stuck. As far as I know, nobody ever called Patsy by his right name; in fact, nobody seemed to know what his square name might be. But everybody used to just call him Patsy and it made him furious.

PATSY was convinced of two things in this world. First of all, he was convinced that he was the unluckiest gambler that ever drew breath, and I must say I can see where he got that idea because he bucked Rocco's crap table every payday from

1933 to 1940 and I don't think he went away winner more than once. That once was close to Christmas, and I knew Patsy hadn't saved anything out of his pay up at the mill—which was about twenty bucks a week—and I figured he'd have to buy his girl a present, so I sort of let him win a hundred and forty bucks figuring we'd get it back after the holidays. Rocco gave me hell for it and told me if it ever happened again it would come out of my pay, and, believe me, mister, it never happened again. The other thing Patsy believed was that some day his luck would turn and that when that happened he'd beat that crap table out of every cent he'd poured into it, and more too.

Well, like I said, Patsy dropped every cent he could get his hands on into that crap game from 1933 to 1940, and when he stopped coming around, Rocco was worried about him. Not that Rocco gave a damn about Patsy, really. He just thought of Patsy as a kind of agent who had to work all week at a heavy machine and then bring his money to Rocco, and he was sore when Patsy didn't show up, same as a father might be if sonny boy failed to pony up the weekly check.

The upshot of it all was that he sent me up to Patsy's end of town to look around for him. It was along about November, 1940, that I went wandering up to the bunch of little houses back of the mill where I figured Patsy must live. It's funny, but I'd never been up that way before; working late nights, I'd always had a room near Rocco's place, and when I wasn't working or sleeping I'd usually drop down here for a drink. Well, the first person I ran into was Patsy's girl. Real pretty she was, too, which is kind of surprising when you figure Patsy wasn't much of a catch, being just another guy who worked in the mill, and not even one of the steady ones who'd bring home a full envelope every

Friday, but a born gambler who'd never have a nickel. But everybody's always known that Louise was Patsy's girl and that was that. I guess she started going with him in high school, before he'd really begun gambling, and when the dice bug bit him she figured she ought to stick with him, same as if he was sick or something, which, in a manner of speaking, he was.

Well, I gave Louise a big smile and an extra cheerful hello, and she just sort of froze up and went on up the street without a word. I followed her, and finally she went into a grocery store, and so did I. Once I'd told her that we were just curious about why Patsy hadn't been around to Rocco's in so long, that he didn't owe us any money or anything, she unfroze a little, and told me that Patsy was in the Army and that he wouldn't be back for a year; not, she was quick to add, that it was any of my business. Well, having nothing better to do, I walked her home, and when we got there, she asked me in, just out of politeness, I guess. Louise is about the politest girl there is. We talked of this and that, mostly about Patsy, and I could see that she didn't hold Patsy's failings against me, which was only right after all. She told me about how Patsy had quit the dice time and time again, and how they were always figuring on getting married as soon as he'd saved up enough money, but how he'd always break down as soon as he got his hands on his pay chit and go down to Rocco's and blow it in. Of course, like I said, it wasn't any of my fault, the whole thing, but listening to her tell it, I was almost ashamed of myself. I got Patsy's address from her, which was Camp Carson, Colorado, and wished her luck, and went back to Rocco's.

Well, Patsy turned out to be only the first of a lot of guys to go into the Army from our town, and eventually it got so

the place was mainly populated by over-age bankers, school-kids, and women. The guys who weren't drafted, it seems they all took off for the other towns chasing after the war-plants and the big money. Maybe for a lot of guys the war was a time for big money, but not for Rocco and me. We kept the house going as long as we could, even put in slot machines and let the women in, but it was no use. We started booking horses, and the horses stopped running. So what we wound up doing was the best we could, like the fellow says, and take my word for it, mister, it was no good. We like to starve to death before the war was over.

Well, when it finally did end, the boys started coming back, and the dice started to roll again. Not just small time stuff like before, real big time, big money, games. The boys were all loaded from the shipyards and the airplane factories, and wages were way up at the mill, and what with one thing and another we raised the minimum bet at the crap table from half a buck to half a pound, and Rocco raised me from a hundred and a quarter to two-and-a-half. Things were really great; only one more thing we needed: Patsy. He didn't show up with the rest of the boys, and I was beginning to think that maybe he was as unhandy a soldier as he was a dice-shooter, and in that case he sure never would be back.

THEN one night, after closing time at Rocco's, I was sitting right in here having a drink, not behind the bar like now, but over there at one of those little tables, when who should come strolling through the front door? That's right, chum, Patsy himself.

"Hiya, Patsy!" I said. I was really glad to see him—not just because of business, you know. He was like an old friend, even if I never knew him except

as another guy to slide the dice to.

He looked at me kind of funny. "Name's John, Tony," he said. "Not Patsy. I learned a lot in the Army, Tony."

He came over and sat down and started to talk. He told me how he'd been overseas, in Italy with the ski troops, and how he'd seen a lot of killing and done a little himself. But he'd been careful. Real careful. "You know why I was so careful, Tony?" he asked me. I just looked at him. "I was careful, Tony, because I wanted to get back to this town. I wanted to go up to Rocco's and get hunk with that damn dice game of his. When you see him, Tony, you tell him I'm in town and I've got money and I'm coming up tomorrow night—" he glanced at his watch—"make that tonight, and give his dice game a real going-over."

Well, when he said that, I knew he hadn't learned as much in the Army as he thought. A man going duck hunting doesn't tell the ducks. It gives them a chance to get set.

Rocco and I got set, O.K. We checked over our board and our dice, and we went over to the bank and got a great big stack of crisp, fresh-looking hundreds because in a big game it helps if the house has a lot of cash money to flash around.

When we opened for business that night, I could tell something was up. All the boys from the mill were there, and we figured Patsy had been telling them his big plans. Some of the lads came over to the dice table and started shooting, five bucks at a time, but you could tell they were just killing time. Rocco was walking around between the roulette wheel and the craps setup with an expression on his face like a cat that figures to eat a canary.

About ten o'clock Patsy walked in, and the whole crowd, as if it was a

signal, moved over to the dice table. They were standing about four deep around it. The boy who was shooting made his point and picked his saw off the pass line. Then, instead of putting down some more money and shooting again, he set the dice down on the edge of the table. In any language in the world that means the shooter passes the dice.

"Whose dice?" I said.

Patsy shoved his way through the crowd just to the right of the boy who'd passed the dice and said: "I'll take 'em, Tony. O.K.?"

"Well, Patsy—" I began.

"John." He still didn't sound mad. Just firm.

"John," I said. "You're supposed to let the dice come around to you once, but unless there's some objection, they're yours."

Nobody objected. Patsy picked up the dice. Rocco came over and stood beside me to watch. There was an awful dead silence while Patsy rolled out. Every once in a while I'd say, "Pay the line" or "Pay the field", but there weren't any other bettors. Just Patsy. He was betting twenty bucks at a time, and Rocco and I just stood there and watched him make five points in a row, which put him a hundred ahead and was a little unusual, but nothing shocking. He was shooting with perfectly honest dice, of course; any time a man shoots only twenty bobs in Rocco's he'll get honest dice, the way I told you. I was starting to relax a little when it happened.

Patsy slapped down another twenty bucks and rolled two fours. Then, while the dice—perfectly honest dice, you understand—were still lying there on the table, down at my end way out of his reach, he turned to Rocco.

"Lay the odds, Rocco?" he asked, very quietly, like you might ask someone the time of day. This meant he wanted to

bet some more that he'd make his eight before he rolled a seven, and that he wanted Rocco to give him the odds, which are to six to five he won't.

"For how much." Rocco sounded disinterested, and his voice let everybody know he'd handle any bet a punk like Patsy could make.

"A thousand," said Patsy.

"Laying twelve hundred to a thou," said Rocco, looking down at my stick.

I tightened my fist around the head of my stick and spun the dice back to Patsy. He didn't look at them, just picked them up in his right hand and shook them back and forth in his fist, holding them way over his head. He slipped his left hand into his pants pocket, hauled out his wallet, and tossed it on the table. "Tony," he said, "get a thousand out of there and put it on the pass line." I reached over, picked up the wallet, and glanced inside. There was a lot more than a thousand in there, at least a hundred C-notes, it looked like. I picked ten of them out and tossed them on the line. Rocco peeled twelve of his bills off the house stack and added them to the pile.

"Like to see what you're shooting for." Rocco said with that oily grin of his. I suddenly decided I didn't care much for Rocco. For a second, I wished I could get another chance at stick-handling those dice so I could give Patsy the honest ones back again.

PATSY started shaking the dice again, and then brought his hand towards the table. Everybody craned to get a better look. Then, before he turned the dice loose, he stopped again, and put his hand, dice and all, back over his head, like a football player about to toss a pass. He looked over at Rocco like he'd just had an idea.

"Hey, Rocco," he said, very casual, "how much money in that stack?"

"Come on, come on, fire your pistol!" Rocco came back, getting a little impatient. "You going to take all night for your lousy grand? There's enough down there to cover any bet you want to make, Patsy." He said "Patsy" like it was an insult, not like a nickname.

"Good," said Patsy. Then he looked at me. "Tony," he said, "would you please take ten thousand out of that wallet and put it on the 'Come.'"

Like the fellow says, my life started to flash through my head a little bit at a time and I started to get dizzy. What Patsy was doing was, well, he was betting he'd come. "Come" in a crap game means to make your point starting when you make your bet. I guess you've never shot craps, Mac, so I won't try and explain it to you; the important thing is, if you roll a seven, you've come, and you win. And Patsy was betting ten grand he'd win. And I'd just sticked him two dice that couldn't come up any way *but* seven!

I just stood there, and the guys from the mills started to mutter and chatter among themselves. "What's holding you back? You going to take all night for a lousy ten grand?" One of the mill guys gave a sort of nervous laugh. I looked at Rocco. He was just standing there with his mouth part ways open, like he was seeing what was happening but he didn't quite believe it.

Well, what could I do? I tossed Patsy's ten grand over on the little kidney-shaped part of the layout marked "Come". I closed my eyes while he threw the dice, and when I opened them up again, all the mill guys were cheering, and Patsy was helping himself to ten grand out of Rocco's dough. When he had it all counted up and put away in his poke he turned to me and said: "I guess I lose my twenty, Tony. Two rolls, no coffee. Too bad."

Then he turned away and walked out

of Rocco's place and you could tell he wasn't coming back. The twenty, of course, was still on the table, and, like I was dreaming, I picked it up and put it in what was left of Rocco's stack.

That wound up the crap shooting for that night, and I walked down here from Rocco's not seeing much where I was going or who I bumped into. It was all a kind of bad dream, like I said.

Well, I'd got a week's salary out of Rocco just the day before all this happened, and I had a kind of hunch it was going to be the last I'd ever get from him, so I sat down in here and drank most of it up. There was something in what Patsy'd done that didn't add up, something that was familiar, vaguely familiar to me, like I'd been through it all before.

About halfway through my ninth bourbon, or maybe my tenth, it came to me. A story my old man used to tell me, about a sucker who'd cleaned out a crap game he knew was crooked, just the same way Patsy did. It had happened to my old man years ago, in San Remo, Italy. I put down what was left of my drink and started some heavy thinking, or as heavy as you can think on eight-and-a-half, or maybe nine-and-a-half, bourbons. Then I remembered that Camp Carson, where the ski troops trained, is not really so very far from Pike's Peak. A guy like Patsy, on a pass, might easily have gone into some gambling joint in, say Colorado Springs, and maybe . . .

Say, I hope I haven't been boring you, chum, but you know, bartenders are supposed to be a little gabby, and I've been a bartender ever since that night.

What's that, bub? What did Patsy do with his ten grand? Well, I don't know if I should tell you that. Your cigar's gone out, though. Here, have a light. Keep 'em. They're on the house. Courtesy of Patsy's Bar and Grill.