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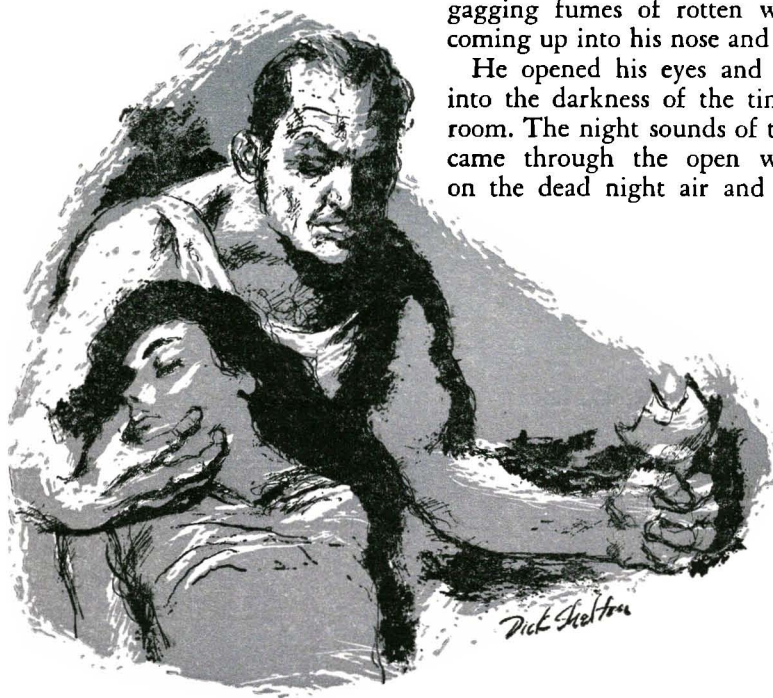
Seven Lousy Bucks

BY C. L. SWEENEY, JR.

He didn't love her, didn't want her. But she was worth more than a pair of shoes.

THE SOUND of the man being sick awakened him. He came out of his drink-drugged sleep slowly, painfully, gradually becoming aware of the dull throbbing ache at his temples, the stifling heat of the August night, the sick-sweet smell of the perspiration oozing from the pores of his flabby white body and soaking his underclothes and the sheet on which he lay, the gagging fumes of rotten whiskey coming up into his nose and throat.

He opened his eyes and looked into the darkness of the tiny bedroom. The night sounds of the city came through the open window on the dead night air and he lay



Dick Shelton

there and heard them, not moving, staring into the blackness, his mind groping back into focus. Somewhere in the block a baby was crying, an automobile horn rasped impatiently at a busy intersection, a man's voice was raised in violent argument, a girl giggled excitedly as she was pressed back into the shadows of a doorway.

And above them all he heard the sound of the man being sick. Violently, retchingly, disgustingly sick.

He buried his head in the damp pillow, pulling the edges up around his ears, trying to shut out the sound, feeling his own stomach begin to writhe and groan in sympathy.

God, it was bad enough having Clare bring these bastards up to the apartment, letting them make love to her in the next room, his room, his bed, while he sweltered in this damned hot box. Now even that wasn't enough. Now they had to get sick, too.

He raised himself on his elbows, then with considerable effort forced his heavy body up and around until he sat on the edge of the bed. Sitting up, his head ached even worse and nausea came over him in sickening waves, flooding his senses, like the sound of the man in the bathroom. He fought his stomach down and fumbled frantically about in the darkness until he found the bottle. He held it to his ear and shook it and nearly

laughed aloud with relief as he heard the reassuring gurgle. His hands trembling almost uncontrollably, he unscrewed the cap and pushed the bottle to his lips. Throwing his head back, he felt the stuff burn past his throat to his stomach, then the familiar warm, steadying glow. He shook his head in appreciation, wiping the back of his hand across his thick lips and the stubble of beard on his chin.

That was the ticket. He felt better. Not good, but better. He shook the bottle and there was a faint slopping. Good. Still some left. He'd need it worse later. He always needed the next one worse.

The man had stopped being sick now and he could hear Clare talking to him in that low, throaty, voice of hers. Hearing her, he felt a sudden surge of resentment. The least she could do was show a little common consideration. Bringing some guy up here and letting him get sick all over the place! This did it. This was the payoff. Who's she been bringing up here for months? College boys, office clerks, punks! Ten bucks here, fifteen there. The best had only left twenty-five, and he hadn't bothered to come back. Now she'd brought one that was sick! She wasn't trying. He'd told her before and he'd tell her again. Only this time so she'd remember it.

He listened. He could hear Clare moving about but the man was still quiet. He fumbled for a cigarette,

found one and lit it. Ten lousy bucks! How could anyone live on that kind of money? When things had been going good, before they'd cracked down on the syndicate, he'd spent plenty of dough on her, all right. Clothes, jewelry, furs, car, swell apartment, the works. Even married her. He, Joe, Young Bookie Most Likely to Succeed, he'd married her. Best looking girl in the city, they said. Best looking call girl, they meant, but he'd married her anyway. Set her up in real style so she could be decent and respectable. All right, so now he was down on his luck. All right, so she did have to go back to work for a while. So what? She'd done it before, she could do it again. Typists and stenographers went back to work after they were married. One trade or another, what's the difference?

But ten bucks! Any high school girl with a build could do better than that.

He heard Clare walk up to the door, then knock softly.

"Joe," she said, "Joe, are you awake?"

Awake, he thought, she wants to know if I'm awake. How the hell could anyone sleep with that kind of racket going on. He reached over and flicked on the light. The sudden brightness burned against his eyes and he buried his face in his hands, letting the light trickle slowly through his fingers until he became accustomed to it.

"Joe," she said again, hearing the click of the light switch, knowing he was awake. "I brought a guy up here and he got sick. He's passed out on the bathroom floor." She waited, listening.

He did not move. His mouth tasted rotten and his head had begun to ache again. To hell with her. She'd picked the slob up. Let her take care of him.

"Joe," she said, pleading now, "I can't lift him. Help me get him up on the couch. Please, Joe?"

To hell with her.

"He brought a bottle with him, Joe. It's still half full."

He picked his bottle off the floor and held it to the light. Just one good slug left. Not half full. Not a lot of good slugs. Just one. A man couldn't travel very far on that. Like they say, you can't fly on one wing. He tilted the bottle to his lips and drained it. Then he stood up and walked to the door, his bare feet slapping against the floor. He turned the key in the lock. He always kept it locked. Didn't want some clown stumbling in the wrong room and finding him. He didn't give a damn about the guy but he had his pride, hadn't he?

He opened the door. Clare was standing there, still in her evening gown, the one he had always liked, the tight blue one. He stopped, framed in the doorway, and looked at her. By God, she was still a good looking dame. Sometimes he almost forgot, living like this. Still

had her figure. He rubbed his hand across his sagging paunch. More than he could say. Still had those same long tapered legs, those same smooth soft curves of thigh and stomach, those same breasts, firm and full, that she'd had when he met her. What was the matter with these guys? Ten bucks. Ten lousy bucks. Didn't they know a woman when they saw one?

"He's in the bathroom," she said. "He got sick in the cab coming over. He drank a lot and it was pretty close in the cab."

The blonde hair was all hers, too. No bleach job. All hers, like the pink and white complexion. Still a good looking dame. He ran his tongue over his lips. The eyes a little dark and tired, maybe, a line or two here and there, but still a good looking dame. He felt a quick unaccustomed warmth.

"Come on, Joe," she said, urging, "help me get him up on the couch."

He suddenly reached out and pulled her to him, forcing her body against his, violently, brutally, crushing her lips beneath his own, running his hand across her bare shoulders, down the flesh-soft smoothness of her back, down. For a moment she went limp and then he felt her stiffen and push herself away. He reached for her again, breathing hard.

"Not now, Joe," she said, looking over her shoulder to the half open bathroom door. "Later. After

we get him taken care of. Later, Joe." She backed away.

He looked at her. Damn. A man couldn't even make love to his own wife in his own apartment any more.

She was across the room. "Come on, Joe. Help me with him." She was smiling now, enticing, promising.

Okay, why make a big thing out of it. Get this joker out of the way. Then we'll see if she still remembers her Joe. We'll see.

He walked across the floor to the bathroom door. "Where's the bottle?" he wanted to know. "You said there was half a bottle."

"After we move him," she said. "I'll get it after we move him."

He wheeled, his frayed nerves snapping. "After we move him," he shouted, "after we move him. Everything is after we move him." He smashed his fist down on a small end table and a lamp teetered crazily and crashed to the floor. "I want a drink now!"

"Okay," she said, her practiced voice soothing, calm. "Okay, Joe, keep your voice down. I'll get it for you." She went into the kitchen.

He realized that he was trembling, and when she came back and held the fifth out to him he snatched it from her and put it to his lips, hearing the pleasant gurgle, feeling the warmth of it spread through his body, not putting it down until he felt the trembling pass. He took a deep breath of satis-

faction, feeling new, whole, alive again.

She was standing there watching him. Just standing there, her eyes half-narrowed, something burning deep behind them. He tried to make it out. Was it hate? Loathing? Passion? Want? He gave it up. Why try to guess. He moistened his lips. He'd find out, no guessing, in a couple minutes now.

"All right," he said, suddenly impatient, "let's get this over with. Let's get this punk out of here."

She started toward him, to help.

"I'll take care of it," he told her, flexing his arms, swelling his chest. "I can handle him."

She stopped.

He pushed the bathroom door fully open and placed the bottle down on the floor inside. The man was lying on his back, on the floor, his head between the toilet and the tub, his feet toward the door. He was fully dressed. His clothes were rumpled and mussed but well-cut, his shoes newly shined. He looked like money. Not a lot, but enough. He wasn't too old, maybe thirty-five, not bad looking. There was a thick gold wedding band on his left hand and he was asleep and breathing deeply. Out. Out cold.

If there had been any mess, Clare had cleaned it up. Thank God for that. He wouldn't have been in any mood for what was coming if he'd had to take care of that, too.

He took the man by the feet and

pulled him into the center of the bathroom floor. The leather of the shoes was warm and smooth in his hands. Good shoes, expensive shoes. Expensive. Money. Then he remembered. He looked over his shoulder at Clare, standing in the door. "How much did he pay you?"

She shook her head. "He didn't. We didn't do anything. He got sick first."

He snorted, looking down at the man, nudging him with a bare foot. "Hell," he said, "he owes you anyway. It wasn't your fault. You were willing." He knelt down and reached under the man and extracted his billfold. He stood up.

"No, Joe," she said, "he doesn't owe me anything. Put it back."

He ignored her, pulling the bills out, looking at them, counting them.

"Put it back, Joe," she said again, her voice hard now. "We don't have to roll anybody. We don't need money that bad."

He was tearing wildly at the billfold, ripping out the seams, throwing cards and papers about the room. Suddenly he slammed it to the floor and dropped to his knees beside the man, clawing, tearing at his pockets.

"Joe," she almost screamed, not understanding, "Joe, stop it!"

He looked up, still on his knees, his face grotesque with rage and frustration. "You know what he had? You know what this bastard

was going to pay you?" He held the bills up and let them drop from his hand and fall on the man, one by one, as though they were pieces of filth. "Seven! Seven lousy goddam bucks!" He lashed out and hit the man full in the face with his open palm, hard.

"Joe," she screamed, frightened. "Cut it out."

"Cut it out," he shouted back, mimicking her voice. "Cut it out. You bring a cheap bastard up here to sleep with you for seven bucks and you tell me to cut it out." He slapped the man again, backhand this time, and a trickle of blood began to run down from the man's torn lip.

The man mumbled but did not move.

She flared at him, her voice not screaming now but again hard, cutting. "You put that money back, Joe," she said evenly. "You put that money back and leave him alone or I'm going to call the cops."

The words had a sobering effect but he laughed at her, derisively. "You're going to call the cops? You, with a customer out cold on the floor? Don't try to kid me." His eyes traveled over her until they came to her breasts and lingered there. He watched them rise and fall, sharply outlined, straining against the flimsy blue stuff of the dress. He reached over and picked up the bottle and took another long drink, not taking his

eyes from her. "Anyway, Baby, you and I still have a little business to take care of."

Unsteadily, he got to his feet.

She was backing across the room, away from him. "No, Joe, no. Please. Not tonight."

He began to walk toward her, swaying, the bottle in one hand, the crushed bills which he had again picked up in the other. He held the money out to her. "Come on, Baby, I'm a customer. I've got money. Seven bucks. That's all we think you're worth—he," he jerked his head back over his shoulder, "and me, your husband."

Her face was taut, chalk-white, her nostrils distended. "You're not my husband. You're not anything." She spat the words at him, angry, crying, hating words. "You're not anything but a no-good drunken pimp."

The words staggered him, stunned him, words which he knew but had not wanted to hear, had not dared to admit, even to himself. He stood in the center of the floor, his chest pumping; the room beginning to spin wildly about him. Then a blinding wave of rage engulfed him and swept him up and he started for her, a deep animal cry in his throat, compelled to destroy this woman who had dared to name him for what he was.

She was almost at the hall door and she had half turned when the bottle caught her on the temple,

bouncing off and shattering against the frame of the door. She crumpled to the floor, making no sound, no protest.

Instantly he was on his knees beside her, holding her in the crook of his arm, dabbing ineffectively at the ugly broken, bleeding bruise. "Clare, Clare, my God, I didn't mean to, Clare." Tears had already begun to form at the corners of his eyes and a sudden sob racked him.

She did not move. Her head hung back and her rouge and lipstick were garish on the pallor of her face. Her moan tilted the room, turning it, and everything was unreal, impossible, nightmarish as the red heat of anger consumed him.

Still holding her, he slowly lifted his eyes, blinking them, striving for focus, lifted them until they came to and rested on the legs and shoes of the man he had left in the bathroom. The shoes. The expensive shoes. Go ahead, lay there, you bastard. Sleep sound. You've got no worries. Your wife is safe in bed at home. So what if she is tired of you? You can buy someone else's wife for the night. Reasonable, too. This one won't get tired of you. This one isn't like your wife. This one's got to support a drunken husband who hasn't had a job in five years. This one needs the

money. But seven bucks, you bastard. Where's your sense of values? You could at least pay as much for another man's wife as you do for your shoes.

He looked down at Clare. Her features were calm, reposed. He could not remember when she had looked so beautiful.

His eyes went back to the legs, down the legs to the shoes. And so that was all he had thought of her. Seven bucks' worth. Not even ten. Seven. Clare, not worth as much as the shoes he was wearing. His hand dropped to the floor and fastened around the neck of the broken bottle and slowly raised the six inches of ragged broken glass.

Gently he lowered Clare to the floor, smoothing her evening gown, the one he had always liked, the tight blue one, making her comfortable. She moaned but his eyes did not waver from the man.

He got to his feet then and began to walk toward the bathroom, slowly, steadily, the bottle neck in his hand, the sharp ragged edges outthrust. Seven. Seven lousy bucks. Seven bucks worth of woman. Seven bucks worth of wife. Sleep, you bastard, sleep and dream. Dream of the bargain you got this time. You'll never find another one like it again. Not ever, you won't.

