

GUILTY

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W. W. Scott — Editor

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STEPPING UP IN CLASS

by HENRY H. GUILD

Al wanted to advance himself,
be head man, fast, fast, fast



THE only nice thing about Al Nicely was his last name. Although openly scornful of most of the guys he'd gone to school with, he didn't avoid them, but they usually kept out of his way. They wanted no part of him.

That was okay with Al. He'd served a hitch in the army with most of those honest Joes, but when they all got out most of the other guys took a different outlook on life.

They got jobs, mainly in factories; most of them married and started raising families at once. Al Nicely used to watch the squares leaving with their lunch pails in the morning and returning at night to squawking wives and squalling brats.

Not Al. That kind of life was strictly for jerks, he reasoned. Al had never earned a so-called honest buck in his life and was

proud of it. Too many ways of making a fast buck and Al Nicely knew all the tricks. In his racket a guy didn't have to use his fists. A .45 carried the only real authority.

Al was born and raised on North Broadway in Los Angeles and got an early start in the rackets. At the start of his hitch in the army at eighteen, he was a tough, ruthless hood with the experience of a much older guy. What he learned in the army about self-defense added to his experience.

In Al's book nothing could beat the effectiveness of a .45, especially to a guy who had the guts to use it. It was inevitable that the word would get around and that meant becoming a member of the Northside crime syndicate.

Al had caught on with the syndicate a year ago, gradually stepping up from slop details to the big assignments. But oddly enough, being the top gunman in the organization run by Louie Martinez didn't satisfy him completely.

Al Nicely burned with an intense ambition to be the top man in the syndicate. He want-

ed to really step up in class; not only be a big wheel in the outfit, but the king of the hill.

Of course, the big problem was Louie Martinez. Louie was the headman and intended to stay that way. The big guy was no soft touch; he was tough and ruthless and ran the outfit with an iron hand. It looked like he'd be around for a long time.

That was the thing that really bugged Al Nicely. He was not a big wheel in the outfit, but did command respect and a great deal of fear as the top gunman. That wasn't enough.

Al was determined to step up in class; some day he'd be the king of the hill. When that time came, he would not miff the chance. He would use any means to attain that objective.

Now the idea was to play it cool and handle the assignments in an efficient manner. He'd go along with the strict and rugged discipline handed out by Louie Martinez, play it cagey and smart, then move fast when he had the opportunity.

When the big chance came along nobody would stop him. Al was sure of that. Not even Louie Martinez.

THE word reached Al late that Friday afternoon. Louie Martinez wanted to see him that night at seven; a private deal in the headman's office at headquarters on North Broadway.

The headman never had private interviews with punks. A real important assignment, Al decided. He carefully checked his .45, then slipped it into his shoulder holster. Al too, had something real important in mind.

He arrived at headquarters shortly before seven that night. He went upstairs to Martinez's private office, knocked sharply on the door, then entered when he heard the gruff voice.

Louie Martinez looked up as the big kid walked in. He was sitting behind a big desk in the middle of the room. The headman had black hair, bushy eyebrows and smoldering black eyes that stared right through a guy.

"Hello Al," he said. "Pull up a chair. Let's talk."

Al nodded. His eyes ran over the tailored suit the headman was wearing and glued themselves to the glistening rock on

the ring finger of his right hand. He waited.

The man behind the desk smiled as he watched the big kid. He wasted no time in getting to the point. "Al, you want to be a big wheel in my outfit?" he asked.

"That's what I want," Al said.

"You don't like being my top gunman? You've handled the job pretty good in the past year," the headman said.

"It's okay, Louie. I only want to get ahead, become one of your real big wheels. I can handle it."

The dark man smiled. "Yeah. I think you can. I've been watching you for a long time and now I think you're ready."

Al frowned. "Ready for what?"

"Ready to step up in class, Al."

"You got me interested, Louie. Keep talking."

The headman's lips tightened as his eyes hardened. "First, you've got to handle one big assignment at ten o'clock tonight. You handle it right and you're in, kid."

"I'll handle it right, Louie. What's the assignment?"

"I want you to blast Sid Benson!"

"Sid Benson?" The name came out of Al's mouth like an explosion. "Jeez. The top man of the Eastside outfit?"

"Yeah, that's the guy. You know him. We all know him."

"Sid's a real tough cat," Al protested. "He's got a real rough mob back of him. I ain't talked to the guy for a long time. It ain't healthy for us guys to go into the Eastside."

The dark man frowned. "I said it was a real rough job, kid. It ain't going to be easy. That's why I picked you."

The big kid's face paled. "I can handle any assignment," he snapped. "But I don't feel like walking into Sid's Eastside headquarters and blasting the guy. I still want to live. I don't feel like committing suicide."

Louie's face flushed. "Listen, kid. Give me credit for having some brains. I got this whole operation all planned."

"I'm sorry, Louie. Just give me the setup."

"That's better, Al. This is a tough assignment that takes a lot of guts, but I figure you can handle it."

"I can handle it, Louie.

What's the deal?"

"You gotta take some chances on a job like this, but I want you to come out of it alive. After you blast Sid Benson I'm going to make you my number two man in the organization."

"That's fine, Louie. That's what I want."

"Okay. I said the whole operation was planned, so listen real close." Louie handed the big kid a small card.

"What's this? This ain't the address of their headquarters," Al protested.

"That's right, Al. That's the address of a bungalow near Soto Street. Every Friday night, at ten o'clock, that lousy punk Sid Benson goes there. He stays all night."

Al grinned. "A broad?"

Louie returned his grin. "Right. A broad and what a dame. A smart little piece. She works for me."

Al sucked in his breath. "A decoy to set up the pigeon?"

"You catch on fast, kid. She's been playing the sucker for the last three months. For a while, Sid took his bodyguard Sammy along, but now he goes there alone."

Al nodded as the headman went on, "You get the picture? Every guy has got a weakness and Sid Benson's is women. I just been waiting for the guy to get careless so that we could take care of him. That time is here."

Al nodded. "With just him and the dame and with Sid's mind on nothing else but the broad, he'll be a sitting duck."

"You get the picture, kid. I told you the whole thing was planned. I started working on this deal six months ago, but the job has to be handled right—no slipups."

"I'll handle it right, Louie." "I figured you would, kid. Okay. You got about two hours. Get there at ten. Wait a few minutes for Sid to get going with the broad, then you know what to do."

"Sure. I'll ease into the joint and surprise the guy. Blast the punk and then scram. What about the dame?"

"Forget about the dame. You blast Sid Benson. That's your job. The dame knows what to do."

"Okay, Louie. Then what?" "Drive back here to headquarters. Be careful. I'll be

waiting for you. When you get here we talk about the future."

"Okay, Louie. Consider the job done." Al got up to leave.

He turned as he heard the gruff voice. "Kid, you handle this right and you'll be a real big wheel in the outfit."

"I'll handle it right. With Sid Benson blasted, you'll need a big man to help you. Maybe to run the Eastside outfit?"

The man behind the desk scowled. "Later, Al. We talk about that later. Okay?"

"Okay, Louie. We talk about that later."

Al grinned as he left the office. He was still grinning as he drove away from headquarters in his car.

Al Nicely had about two hours to kill before it was time to send Sid Benson off to join a few of his ancestors.

He drove his car a mile away from the Northside headquarters and pulled up across the street from a drug store. He sat in his car for a short time. Al was doing some thinking about the big break that had come his way.

Quickly, he made up his

mind. Thinking was okay, but this was something that called for action. Action backed up by his .45. He got out of the car and walked to the drug store.

He entered the store and walked to one of the enclosed phone booths. He dialed a number, talked briefly, then left the store. He got in his car and drove toward the Eastside.

There was a big grin on the kid's face as he kept the car at around thirty. He yanked out the card that Louie had given him and tore it up. Al wasn't driving to the bungalow at ten that night. He was headed for the headquarter's building of the Eastside mob headed by Sid Benson.

It was shortly after eight when he pulled in to the lot adjoining the building that was the Eastside syndicate headquarters. He parked the car and walked rapidly toward the building. The joint looked real quiet, was almost in darkness.

He reached the front door and knocked sharply. A panel in the door slid open and an ugly face stared out at him.

"Hello Sammy," Al said. "Sid's expecting me."

The big goon nodded and

opened the door. Al stepped in and looked around. The room was empty. He stared at the big ugly brute who was the chief bodyguard for Sid Benson.

"Sammy, I said that Sid was expecting me," he said.

"Yeah, I know," the big guy sneered. "Come on."

Al followed the big guy up the winding stairway to the upper floor. He knew it was a big risk stepping into the lair of the rival gang, but his plan called for taking big chances. He patted the .45 in his shoulder holster.

Sammy knocked on the door, opened it and motioned for Al to follow him into the room. He closed the door and waited.

Al looked at the little guy sitting at the desk that damned near hid him. Sid Benson was on the small side, with sharp gray eyes, thinning brown hair and a flat, expressionless face.

"Okay, Al. Draw up a chair and sit down," he said.

Al looked at Sammy as he sat down, then stared at Sid. "What I got to say to you is private, Sid," he said.

The little guy smiled. "Okay Sammy. I'll see you later."

The big bodyguard silently left the room. Sid Benson kept staring. "Supposing you tell me all about that telephone call you made a few minutes ago," he said.

"I got something real big in mind, Sid," Al began.

The little man broke in, "Okay, kid, but make it snappy. I gotta be someplace at ten o'clock. I got an appointment."

"Yeah, Sid. I know. At ten o'clock tonight, you got an appointment with death." He watched the little guy.

Sid Benson's face twitched. "What the hell you talking about, kid? What do you know about ten o'clock tonight?"

"Sid. Listen close. At ten o'clock tonight you were to be with a dame in a bungalow offa Soto Street? Right?"

Benson's face paled. "How the hell did you know that?"

Al grinned. "Because I was supposed to blast you tonight at ten o'clock. Orders from Louie Martinez."

"Then that bitch is..."

"Right. A decoy, working for Louie."

"Why, that lousy bastard. And the dame; I'll take care of that bitch, for sure."

"Later, Sid. Later. Listen to me first."

"Okay, keep talking. But I don't get you. Why tell me all of this? I don't get your angle."

"Listen, Sid. I took one hell of a chance coming here. Well, I'm going to take a bigger chance. You play ball with me and we both will be in real big."

Sid's crafty eyes narrowed. "How do I know if I can trust you? I still don't get your angle."

"You can trust me. I already saved your life, ain't I?"

"Yeah. Keep talking, kid. I'm getting interested."

"Good. Sid, I gotta deal, but I need your help. It's a double cross to end all double crosses. Still interested?"

"Yeah. Keep talking. It better be good or you ain't going to keep talking very long."

Al's lips tightened. "It's real good. Louie Martinez expects me to blast you, then report back to him. Then he says he'll make me a big wheel in his outfit, but that ain't good enough. I want to be the headman and..."

Sid broke in, "Where do I come in, kid?"

"Listen and you'll find out. Here's my plan. I go back to Louie after he thinks I blasted you. Then I blast him!"

Benson whistled. "You blast him then what?"

"That's when I need your help, Sid," the big kid said.

"Blasting Louie will be the easiest part of the deal. After I do that, I scram outta the joint and hurry back here."

"Then what, Al?"

"You have a small bunch of guys lined up with Sammy in charge. We go back and take over the Northside outfit. With Louie dead, it will be a breeze."

The little man kept staring at Al. "Okay. We take over Louie's outfit, then what?"

Al grinned. "I take over as headman of the Northside outfit. You keep on running the Eastside, but from then on we work together. We control all of the North and Eastside."

"We merge the two outfits in one big syndicate?"

"That's right, Sid. We work together instead of fighting each other and we increase the take. Then we split the gross right down the middle. This will really be a big deal."

Al stared at the little man and waited for his reaction. Sid Benson was doing a hell of a lot of thinking. Finally, he grinned. "The deal sounds crazy, but it might work."

"Sid, we can't miss."

"A real crazy deal, but I'm interested," the little man said. "I guess I can trust you after all. I owe you my life right now. But why didn't you blast me and then blast Louie?"

"Sid, I told you. One guy can't handle it. I need your help to take over Louie's outfit. Is it a deal?"

Sid Benson nodded. "A real crazy deal. Crazy enough to work. Okay kid. You got a deal."

"Good. After I blast Louie, I come back here and see you. Have some of the guys take care of the broad so she won't talk."

"Yeah. I'll sure do that."

"Okay, Sid. Then we move in fast and take over the Northside outfit. After that, we can make arrangements to work together. We'll go over the whole setup."

"Okay, Al. You got a deal."

The two men got up and shook hands. "Sid, I'll see you later, maybe around eleven. Then we move fast. Okay?"

"Okay, kid. What kind of a double cross did you call this?"

Al grinned. "A double cross to end all double crosses."

Sid Benson laughed. "That's a good one."

"See you later, Sid." Al glanced at his watch, then left the room. He saw no one as he walked down the stairway, opened the front door and walked to his car.

He was grinning as he drove away. This was going to be a real big night. And it was only the start. Sid Benson didn't look too tough to him. Maybe in time, Al Nicely could take over both outfits. Why not? All it needed was a little planning and some real fast action. Some real fast action.

After Al left the Eastside headquarters he drove to a side street and parked his car. He smoked about half a pack of cigarettes and kept looking at his watch constantly.

It was ten-fifteen when he finally started up the car and drove carefully back toward

the North Broadway sector of town.

He turned into the parking lot of the Northside syndicate and parked his car. He checked his .45 as he walked to the back of the building. He used the back stairways.

Al walked up the back stairway and paused at the door to Louie's office. As far as he could determine no one had seen him enter the building. Without knocking, he opened the door.

Louie Martinez looked up with a scowl on his face as Al entered. "What's the big idea, kid? Don't you knock?"

Al grinned. "I forgot Louie. Just forgot."

The big man gave him a puzzled look. "Well? You take care of the assignment?"

"Not yet, Louie."

Louie glared. "What the hell do you mean, not yet?"

Quickly, Al yanked out the .45 and walked toward the big man. "I made a little change in the assignment, Louie. I didn't blast Sid Benson. I got a different idea."

Louie jumped out of his chair and walked toward the big kid. He stopped abruptly

when Al rasped. "Hold it, big man."

The kid raised the .45 and pointed it at Louie's skull.

"You crazy, punk kid," the big man sputtered. "What the hell's the matter? What do you think you're going to do?"

"I'm going to kill you, Louie!"

The threat was gone from the big man's voice. "Why, Al?" he pleaded. "Why this crazy caper? I told you I'd make you the number two man as soon as you blasted Sid Benson."

"That's not good enough, Louie. I'm going to be the number one man; the headman of this outfit."

"You won't get away with it, kid," Louie said hoarsely. "You kill me and the gang downstairs will tear you to pieces."

tering step toward him. "Kid,

"Let me worry about that, you big slob."

Al watched the panic whip across the big man's face as his finger tightened on the trigger of the .45. Louie took one fal-
you can't do th..."

He never finished the sentence. The roar of the .45

sounded like a cannon in the room. Al watched the big man fall heavily to the floor. He walked over and pumped two more slugs into the bloody mess that had once been Louie Martinez's face.

Quickly, he walked out of the room. He ran down the back stairs, smiling as he heard the pounding feet rushing up to the office of the late Louie Martinez. He ran to his car and started it. With a loud roar of the engine and a shattering screeching of the tires he toolled the car out of the yard.

He slowed down as he turned into North Broadway and headed to First Street. The first part of his plan was completed. Now to see Sid Benson and carry out the rest of it. He turned east on First Street and headed toward the Eastside headquarters.

IT was a few minutes past eleven when Al Nicely pulled into the Eastside building. He walked to the front door, rapped sharply, then entered when the door was opened by Sammy.

"Everything okay?" Sammy asked.

"Yeah. Let's see Sid right away," Al answered.

He followed the big goon up the stairway and into the office.

Sid looked up. "You blast big Louie Martinez?"

"Yeah. We're all set. Let's get going," Al said.

He turned and looked at Sammy. The big hood didn't move. Al looked at the little man sitting behind the desk.

"Okay, Sammy," Sid said. "Get going on that little deal we talked about." The big guy left the room.

Al frowned. "Come on, man. Let's get moving real fast. That mob over on the Northside are going nuts right now with big Louie Martinez laying on the floor with his face looking like a jungle cat had ripped it to pieces."

Sid gave him a thin smile. "No hurry, Al. My boys already took care of the broad and right now they're on their way to take over what's left of Louie's outfit."

Al snarled, "What the hell you talking about? That's an operation that I'm in charge of. All you do is help me."

"Relax, kid, relax. Every-

thing is being taken care of."

"Listen, you little jerk," Al snarled. "Remember our agreement? This is my operation; you just help me take over, then we merge and run the two outfits."

"That's what you think, sucker," Sid sneered.

Something was stinking rotten, Al realized. The plan was fouled up. He patted the .45 in his shoulder holster.

"Sid, maybe you better explain a few things to me."

"Sure kid, sure. Sit down and relax." Al didn't move as the little guy went on. "I like your idea up to a certain point, but when it comes to splitting the take, no deal."

"Keep talking, Sid."

"Kid, you just did a job for me that I figured on doing for a long time. Blasting big Louie Martinez. But I intend to run the whole operation myself now."

"And what about Al Nicely?"

"Al, I like your style. I can make a place for you in my outfit. Nothing real big yet, but a spot. You understand?"

The bitter realization that he'd been played for a champ

sucker hit Al like a bolt of lightning. His own sweet double cross was now being offset by another double cross that made his pale into insignificance. Any talk now was useless.

His hand snaked into his coat and grabbed the .45. He whipped it out, then went into a deep freeze.

"Hold it, punk," he heard Sammy say.

Al turned and saw the big goon standing at the door. He stared at the .45 pointing at his guts. He was sweating as he realized he'd been set up for a prize chump.

To hell with the bastards. He'd shoot his way out. First Sammy, then the little double-crossing bastard in back of the desk. Then he felt the sting of the slug and heard the roar of the .45 when he started to raise his own gun.

His .45 flew out of his hand. He stared down at the blood gushing out of his forearm. He turned as he heard the calm voice.

"Good work, Sammy. You handled it just right," Sid said. "You send the boys over to the Northside?"

"Yeah, Boss. They're taking over right now," Sammy said. "When do you want me to blast this lousy punk?"

"No hurry, Sammy. Maybe he wants to talk some more."

Al turned to the little guy. "Look Sid," he pleaded. "I'll go along with your deal. Just make a spot for me—any spot is okay. Whatever you say and..."

Sid broke in, "Kid, you're just a dumb lousy punk. You think I could trust a guy who'd blast his own headman?"

"Sid, I'll stay in line. After all, this whole deal was my idea. You gotta admit it was a good one."

"Listen punk," the little man snarled. "In this outfit I make all the decisions. I don't want double-crossing guys with too much ambition around me. Just guys who follow orders."

"What you going to do, Sid?"

"Can't you guess, kid?"

"Sid, I..."

"Shut up, you goddam lousy punk. Just shut up. I got no further use for you." Sid's eyes narrowed as he turned to Sammy and made a motion.

Al turned and faced the big goon. There was no expression on the flat face of the big hood. Slowly, he raised the gun, pointing it at Al's head.

Panic whipped across Al Nicely's face as he saw the finger tighten on the trigger. In one last brief mental flash, he realized that a little ambition was fine—stepping up in class was fine—but too much ambition and too little planning could be the death of a guy.

He was done. He was finished. As he made a desperate

grab for his .45 lying on the floor, he heard Sid's voice say, "Okay, S a m m y. Go ahead. Blast the lousy, two-bit punk."

Al never managed to grab the .45. He never felt the bullet that damned near ripped his face off. He hit the floor with a dull thud. His body gave a convulsive quiver, then was still as two more slugs tore into his face.

Al Nicely had failed to step up in class.

THE END
