

THE SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF

The Big Fix



George O. Smith

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Illustrated by Bernklau

THE BIG FIX

BY GEORGE O. SMITH

Anyone who holds that telepathy and psi powers would mean an end to crime quite obviously underestimates the ingenuity of the human race. Now consider a horserace that had to be fixed ...



IT WAS April, a couple of weeks before the Derby. We were playing poker, which is a game of skill that has nothing to do with the velocity of horse meat.

Phil Howland kept slipping open but he managed to close up before I could tell whether the combination of Three-Five-Two-Four meant a full house of fives over fours or whether he was betting on an open-ended straight that he hadn't bothered to arrange in order as he held them. The Greek was impenetrable; he also blocked me from reading the deck so that I could estimate his hand from the cards that weren't dealt out. Chicago Charlie's mind was easy to read but no one could trust him. He was just as apt to think high to score someone out as he was to think low to suck the boys in. As for me, there I was, good old Wally Wilson, holding a pat straight flush from the eight to the queen of diamonds. I was thinking "full house" but I was betting like a weak three of a kind.

It was a terrific game. Between trying to read into these other guy's brains and keeping them from opening mine, and blocking the Greek's sly stunt of tipping over the poker chips as a distraction, I was also concerned about the eight thousand bucks that was in the pot. The trouble was that all four of us fully intended to rake it in. My straight flush would be good for the works in any normal game with wild cards, but the way this bunch was betting I couldn't be sure. Phil Howland didn't have much of a shield but he could really read, and if he read me—either my mind or my hand—he'd automatically radiate and that would be that.

I was about at the point of calling for the draw when the door opened without any knock. It was Tomboy Taylor. We'd been so engrossed

with one another that none of us had caught her approach.

The Greek looked up at her and swore something that he hadn't read in Plato. "Showdown," he said, tossing in his hand.

I grunted and spread my five beauties.

Phil growled and shoved the pot in my direction, keeping both eyes on Tomboy Taylor.

She was something to keep eyes on, both figuratively and literally. The only thing that kept her from being a thionite dream was the Pittsburgh stogie that she insisted upon smoking, and the only thing that kept her from being some man's companion in spite of the stogie was the fact that he'd have to keep his mouth shut or she'd steal his back teeth—if not for fillings, then for practice.

"You, Wally Wilson," she said around the cigar, "get these grifters out of here. I got words."

The Greek growled. "Who says?"

"Barcelona says."

I do not have to explain who Barcelona is. All I have to say is that Phil Howland, The Greek, and Chicago Charlie arose without a word and filed out with their minds all held tight behind solid shields.

I said, "What does Barcelona want with me?"

Tomboy Taylor removed the stogie and said evenly, "Barcelona wants to see it Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace next month."

When I got done gulping I said, "You mean Barcelona wants me to fix the Kentucky Derby?"

"Oh no," she replied in a very throaty contralto that went with her figure and her thousand dollars worth of simple skirt and blouse. "You needn't 'Fix' anything. Just be sure that it's Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace in that order. One, two, three. Do I make Barcelona quite clear?"

I said, "Look, Tomboy, neither of them platers can even *run* that far,

let alone running ahead."

"Barcelona says they can. And will." She leaned forward and stubbed out the Pittsburgh stogie and in the gesture she became wholly beautiful as well as beautifully wholesome. As she leaned toward me she fogged the lighter surface of her mind and let me dig the faintly-leaking concept that she considered me physically attractive. This did not offend me. To the contrary it pleased my ego mightily until Tomboy Taylor deliberately let the barrier down to let me read the visual impression—which included all of the implications contained in the old cliché: "... And don't he look nacheral?"

"How," I asked on the recoil, "can I fix the Derby?"

"Barcelona says you know more about the horse racing business than any other big time operator in Chicago," she said smoothly. "Barcelona says that he doesn't know anything about horse racing at all, but he has great faith in your ability. Barcelona says that if anybody can make it Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace, one, two, and three, Wally Wilson is the man who can do it. In fact, Barcelona will be terribly disappointed if you can't."

I eyed her carefully. She was a composed and poised beauty who looked entirely incapable of uttering such words. I tried to peer into her mind but it was like trying to read the fine print of a telephone directory through a knitted woolen shawl. She smiled at me, her shapely lips curving graciously.

I said, "Barcelona seems to have a lot of confidence in my ability to arrange things."

With those delicate lips still curved sweetly, she said, "Barcelona is willing to bet money on your ability as a manager."

At this point Tomboy Taylor fished another Pittsburgh stogie out of her hundred dollar handbag, bit off the end with a quick nibble of even, pearly-white teeth, and stuffed the cigar in between the arched lips. She scratched a big kitchen match on the seat of her skirt after raising one shapely thigh to stretch the cloth. She puffed the stogie into light and became transformed from a beauty into a hag. My mind swore; it was like painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa.

Out of the corner of her mouth she replied to my unspoken question: "It helps to keep grippers like you at mind's length."

Then she left me alone with my littered card table and the eight thousand buck final pot—and the unhappy recollection that Barcelona had gotten upset at something Harold Grimmer had done, and he'd gone into Grimmer's place and busted Grimmer flat by starting with one lousy buck and letting it ride through eighteen straight passes. This feat of skill was performed under the mental noses of about eight operators trained to exert their extrasensory talents toward the defeat of sharpshooters who tried to add paraphysics to the laws of chance.

Lieutenant Delancey of the Chicago police came in an hour later. He refused my offer of a drink, and a smoke, and then because I didn't wave him to a chair he crossed my living room briskly and eased himself into my favorite chair. I think I could have won the waiting game but the prize wasn't good enough to interest me in playing. So I said, "O.K., lieutenant, what am I supposed to be guilty of?"

His smile was veiled. "You're not guilty of anything, so far as I know."

"You're not here to pass the time of day."

"No, I'm not. I want information."

"What kind of information?"

"One hears things," he said vaguely.

"Lieutenant," I said, "you've been watching one of those halluscene whodunit dramas where everybody stands around making witty sayings composed of disconnected phrases. You'll next be saying 'Evil Lurks In The Minds Of Men,' in a sepulchral intonation. Let's skip it, huh? What kind of things does one hear and from whom?"

"It starts with Gimpy Gordon."

"Whose mind meanders."

He shrugged. "Gimpy Gordon's meandering mind is well understood for what it is," he said. "But when it ceases to meander long enough to follow a single train of thought from beginning to logical end, then something is up."

"Such as what, for instance."

The lieutenant leaned back in my easy-chair and stared at the ceiling. "Wally," he said, "I was relaxing in the car with Sergeant Holliday driving. We passed a certain area on Michigan near Randolph and I caught the strong mental impression of someone who—in this day and age, mind you—had had the temerity to pickpocket a wallet containing twenty-seven dollars. The sum of twenty-seven dollars was connected with the fact that the rewards made the risk worth taking; there were distinct impressions of playing that twenty-seven bucks across the board on three very especial nags at the Derby. The impression of the twenty-seven bucks changed into a mental vision of a hand holding a sack of peanuts. There was indecision. Should he take more risk and run up his available cash to make a larger killing, or would one Joseph Barcelona take a stand-offish attitude if some outsider were to lower the track odds by betting a bundle on Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace."

I said, "Lieutenant, you've a pickpocket to jug. Horse betting is legal."

"Since wagering on the speed of a horse has been redefined as 'The purchase of one corporate share to be valid for one transaction only and redeemable at a par value to be established by the outcome of this aforesaid single transaction,' horse betting is legal. This makes you an 'Investment Counselor, short-term transactions only,' and removes from you the odious nomenclature of 'Bookie.' However, permit me to point out that the buying and selling of shares of horseflesh does not grant a license to manipulate the outcome."

"You sound as though you're accusing me of contemplating a fix."

"Oh no. Not that."

"Then what?"

"Wally, Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace were refused by the National Association Of Dog Food Canners because of their substandard health. If I'm not mistaken, the Derby Association should have to run the race early that Saturday afternoon."

"Early?"

"Uh-huh. Early. Ysee, Wally, the blue laws of the blue grass state make it illegal to run horseraces on Sunday, hence the start of the Derby must be early enough to let our three platers complete the race before midnight."

"Lieutenant, there still stands a mathematical probability that—"

"That the rest of the field will catch the Martian Glanders as they lead our three dogs past the clubhouse turn?"

"Lieutenant, you are wronging me."

"I haven't said a thing."

"Then why have you come here to bedevil me, lieutenant? If Barcelona has ideas of arranging a fix—"

"If Barcelona has such notions, Wally Wilson would know about it."

"Everybody," I said, "entertains notions of cleaning up a bundle by having the hundred-to-one shot come in by a length. Even Barcelona must have wild dreams now and then—"

"Come off it," he snapped. "Something's up and I want to know what's cooking."

"Lieutenant, you're now asking me to describe to you how someone might rig the Kentucky Derby in a world full of expert telepaths and perceptive and manipulators, a large number of which will be rather well-paid to lend their extrasensory power to the process of keeping the Derby pure."

He eyed me sourly. "Remember, 'Fireman' O'Leary?"

"That's an unfair allegation," I replied. "The rumor that he started the Chicago Fire is absolutely unfounded."

"As I recall, 'Fireman' O'Leary came by his nickname about one hundred years after the holocaust that started on DeKoven Street in 1871. It seems that 'Fireman' O'Leary was most useful in helping the fillies home at Washington Park by assaulting them in the region of the bangtail with small bollops of pure incandescence. He was a pyrotic."

"That is a false accusation—"

"It was never proved," admitted the lieutenant, "because any one who accused anybody of making use of extrasensory faculties in 1971 would have been tossed into that establishment out on Narragansett

Avenue where the headshrinkers once plied their mystic trade."

"Things are different now."

"Indeed they are, Wally. Which is why I'm here. No one but a fumbling idiot would try anything as crude as speeding a dog over the line by pyrotics or by jolting the animals with a bolt of electrical energy."

"So—?"

"So considering the sad and sorry fact that human nature does not change very much despite the vast possibility for improvement, we must anticipate a fix that has been contrived and executed on a level that takes full cognizance of the widespread presence of psi-function."

"But again, why me?"

"Was not 'Fireman' O'Leary an ancestor of yours?"

"He was my maternal grandparent."

"And so you do indeed come from a long line of horse operators, don't you?"

"I resent your invidious implications."

"And wasn't 'Wireless' Wilson the paternal ancestor from whom the family name has come?"

"I fail to see ... the allegation that my father's father employed telepathy to transmit track information faster than the wire services has never been proved."

He smiled knowingly. "Wally," he said slowly, "if you feel that allegations have somehow impugned the pure name of your family, you could apply for a review of their several appearances in court. It's possible that 'Fireman' O'Leary did *not* use his pyrotic talent to enhance the running speed of some tired old dogs."

"But—"

"So I think we understand one another, Wally. There is also reason to believe that psionic talent tends to run in families. You're a psi-man and a good one."

"If I hear of anything—"

"You'll let me know," he said flatly. "And if Flying Heels, Moonbeam, *and-or* Lady Grace even so much as succeed in staying on their feet for the whole race, I'll be back demanding to know how you—Wally Wilson—managed to hold them up!"

After which the good Lieutenant Delancey left me to my thoughts—which were most uncomfortable.

Barcelona had to be kept cheerful. But the dogs he'd picked could only come in first unassisted if they happened to be leading the field that started the *next* race, and even then the post time would have to be delayed to give them a longer head start. That meant that *if* our three platers came awake, *everybody* would be looking for the fix.

Anybody who planned a caper would sure have to plan it well.

Barcelona hadn't planned the fix, he merely stated a firm desire and either Barcelona got what he wanted or I got what I didn't want, and I had to do it real good or Delancey would make it real hot for me.

I was not only being forced to enter a life of crime, I was also being forced to perform cleverly.

It wasn't fair for the law to gang up with the crooks against me.

And so with a mind feeling sort of like the famous sparrow who'd gotten trapped for three hours in a badminton game at Forest Hills, I built a strong highball, and poured it down while my hallucene set was warming up. I needed the highball as well as the relaxation, because I knew that the "Drama" being presented was the hundred and umpty-umpth remake of "Tarzan of the Apes" and for ninety solid minutes I would be swinging through trees without benefit of alcohol. Tarzan, you'll remember, did not learn to smoke and drink until the second book.

The hallucene did relax me and kept my mind from its worry even though the drama was cast for kids and therefore contained a maximum of tree-swinging and ape-gymnastics and a near dearth of Lady Jane's pleasant company. What was irritating was the traces of wrong aroma. If one should not associate the African jungle with the aroma of a cheap bar, one should be forgiven for objecting to Lady

Jane with a strong flavor of tobacco and cheap booze on her breath.

And so I awoke with this irritating conflict in my senses to discover that I'd dropped out of my character as Tarzan and my surroundings of the jungle, but I'd somehow brought the stench of cheap liquor and moist cigarettes with me.

There was an occupant in the chair next to mine. He needed a bath and he needed a shave but both would have been wasted if he couldn't change his clothing, too. His name was Gimpy Gordon.

I said, "Get out!"

He whined, "Mr. Wilson, you just gotta help me."

"How?"

"Fer years," he said, "I been living on peanuts. I been runnin' errands for hard coins. I been—"

"Swiping the take of a Red Cross box," I snapped at him.

"Aw, Mr. Wilson," he whined, "I simply gotta make a stake. I'm a-goin' to send it back when I win."

"Are you going to win?"

"Can't I?"

For a moment I toyed with the idea of being honest with the Gimp. Somehow, someone should tell the duffer that all horse players die broke, or that if he could make a living I'd be out of business.

Gimpy Gordon was one of Life's Unfortunates. If it were to rain gold coins, Gimpy would be out wearing boxing gloves. His mental processes meandered because of too much methyl. His unfortunate nickname did not come from the old-fashioned reason that he walked with a limp, but from the even more unfortunate reason that he *thought* with a limp. In his own unhealthy way he was—could we call it "Lucky" by any standard of honesty? In this world full of highly developed psi talent, the Gimp *could* pick a pocket and get away with it because he often literally could not remember where and how he'd acquired the wallet for longer than a half minute. And it was a sort of general unwritten rule that any citizen so utterly befogged as to permit his wealth to be lifted via light fingers should lose it as a lesson!

But then it did indeed occur to me that maybe I could make use of the Gimp.

I said, "What can I do, Gimpy?"

"Mr. Wilson," he pleaded, "is it true that you're workin' for Barcelona?"

"Now, you know I can't answer that."

I could read his mind struggling with this concept. It was sort of like trying to read a deck of Chinese Fortune Cards being shuffled before they're placed in the machine at the Penny Arcade. As the drunk once said after reading the Telephone Directory: "Not much plot, but *egad!* What a cast of characters!" The gist of his mental maundering was a childlike desire to have everything sewed up tight. He wanted to win, to be told that he'd win, and to have all the rules altered ad hoc to assure his winning.

Just where he'd picked up the inside dope that Barcelona favored Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace in the Derby I could not dig out of him. Just how Gimpy had made the association between this clambake and me—good old Wally Wilson—I couldn't dig either. But here he was with his—by now—sixty-five bucks carefully heisted, lifted, pinched and fingered, and by the great Harry, Gimpy was not agoin' to lay it across the board on those three rejects from a claiming race unless he had a cast-iron assurance that they'd come in across the board, one, two, and three.

I said slowly, "*If* I were even thinking of working for Mr. Barcelona," I told him, "I would be very careful never, never to mention it, you know."

This bundle of The Awful Truth hit him and began to sink in with the inexorable absorption of water dropping down into a bucket of dry sand. It took some time for the process to climax. Once it reached Home Base it took another period of time for the information to be inspected, sorted out, identified, analyzed, and in a very limited degree, understood.

POST HORSE	WEIGHT	JOCKEYS	Prob odds	
6 MURDOCH'S HOARD	112	MULL	1-2	— 3-0-0
5 MEWHUS JET	112	KT	3-5	— 3-0-0
7 JOHNNY BRACK		ER	5-7	— 2-3-3
4 PIPERS SON		ERTY	8-5	— 1-1-2
2 DAYMARE		I	3-1	— 9-2-0
3 HELEI O LOI		SE	8-1	— 0-3-0
1 FLYING HEELS		O	100-1	— 0-0-0
8 MOONBEAM			250-1	— 0-0-0
9 LADY GRACE			500-1	— 0-0-0



He looked up at me. "I couldn't cuff a hundred, could I?"

I shook my head. I didn't have to veil my mind because I knew that Gimpy was about as talented a telepath as a tallow candle. Frankly between me and thee, dear reader, I do not put anybody's bet on the cuff. I do a fair-to-middling brisk trade in booking bets placed and discussed by telepathy, but the ones I accept and pay off on—if they're lucky—are those folks who've been sufficiently foresighted to lay it on the line with a retainer against which their losses can be assessed.

On the other hand I could see in Gimpy's mind the simple logic that told him that as a bookmaker I'd be disinclined to lend him money which he'd use to place with me against a sure-thing long shot. If I were to "Lend" him a century for an on-the-cuff bet on a 100:1 horse,

especially one that I knew was sure to come in, I might better simply hand him one hundred times one hundred dollars as a gift. It would save a lot of messy bookkeeping.

So the fact that I wouldn't cuff a bet for Gimpy gave him his own proof that I was confirming the fix.

Then I buttered the process.

"Gimp, do you know another good bookmaker?"

"Sure. But you're the best."

"Know one that'll take a bet from you—one that you don't like?"

"Sure, Mr. Wilson."

"Then," I said hauling a thousand out of my wallet, "Put this on *our horses* for me."

He eyed the grand. "But won't Mr. Barcelona be unhappy? Won't that run down the track odds?"

I laughed. "The whole world knows them dogs as also-rans," I said. "Gimpy, they put long shots like those into races just to clip the suckers who think there is a real hundred-to-one chance that a 100:1 horse will outrun favorites."

"Well, if you say so, Mr. Wilson."

"I say so."

"Thanks. I'll pay it back."

He would. I'd see to that.

Gimpy Gordon scuttled out of my bailiwick almost on a dead run. He was positively radiating merriment and joy and excitement. The note in his hand represented a sum greater than he had ever seen in one piece at any time of his life, and the concept of the riches he would know when they paid off on the Kentucky Derby was vague simply because Gimpy could not grasp the magnitude of such magnificence. Oddly, for some unexpected reason or from some unknown source hidden deep in his past, his mind pronounced it "Darby."

I returned to my African jungle still bored with the lack of anything constructive. I returned at about the point where Tarzan and Jane were going through that silly, "Me Tarzan; You Jane" routine which was even more irritating because the program director or someone had muffed the perfume that the Lady Jane wore. Instead of the wholesome freshness of the free, open air, Jane was wearing a heady, spicy scent engineered to cut its way through the blocking barrier of stale cigar smoke, whisky-laden secondhand air, and a waft of cooking aroma from the kitchen of the standard cosmopolitan bistro.

Worse, it got worse instead of better. Where a clever effects-director might have started with the heavy sophisticated scent and switched to something lighter and airier as Jane was moved away from civilization, this one had done it backwards for some absolutely ridiculous reason. It finally got strong enough to distract me out of my characterization, and I came back to reality to realize once more that reality had been strong enough to cut into the concentration level of a hallucene. There was strong woman-presence in my room, and as I looked around I found that Tomboy Taylor had come in—just as Gimp Gordon had—and was sitting in the other hallucene chair. She was probably playing Lady Jane to my Tarzan.

Tomboy Taylor had changed to a short-skirted, low-necked cocktail dress; relaxed with her eyes closed in my hallucene chair she looked lovely. She looked as vulnerable as a soft kitten. Remembering that it's the soft vulnerable ones that claw you if you touch, I refrained.

I went to my little bar and refilled my highball glass because swinging through the jungle makes one thirsty, and while I was pouring I took a sly peek into Tomboy Taylor's mind.

She was not hallucening. She was watching me. And when I made contact with her, she radiated a sort of overall aura of amusement-emotion, covered up her conscious deliberation, and blocked any probing by directing me mentally, "Make it two, Wally."

I built her one, handed it to her, and then said, "Folks these days sure have forgotten how to use doorbells."

"If you don't want people coming in, Wally, you should restrict your mindwarden a little. It's set to admit anybody who does not approach the door with vigorous intent to commit grave physical harm. When

the thing radiates 'Come in and relax' is a girl supposed to stand outside twiggling on the doorbell?"

I dropped the subject thinking that maybe I shouldn't have brought it up in the first place. It's one that can't be answered by logic, whereas a firm emotional statement of like or dislike stops all counter-argument and I'd made the mistake of questioning my own judgment.

So I eyed her and said, "Tomboy, you did not come here to indulge in small talk."

"No," she admitted. "I'm here to keep track of you, Wally."

"Oh?"

"Our great and good friend wants me to make notes on how clever you are at arranging things."

"You mean Barcelona sent you."

"That's about it."

I looked at her askance. "And how long are you going to stay?"

She smiled. "Until Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace come across the finish line One, Two, and Three at Churchill Downs on Derby Day."

I grinned at her. "Considering that trio of turtles, Tomboy, it may be for years and it may be forever."

She held up her glass in a sort of a toast. "Or," she said, "'Til death do us part!"

A little bitterly I said, "One might think that Barcelona doesn't trust me."

She replied, "It isn't a matter of trust. Barcelona holds you among his very closest friends. He is well aware of the fact that you would do anything for him, that you prize his friendship so highly yourself that you would go to the most desperate lengths to keep it firm and true. Yet he realizes that the simple desire he has recently expressed does place you in a delicate mental attitude. You are likely to feel that he shouldn't have expressed this desire since you feel obligated to fulfill it. He feels that maybe this obligation to maintain friendship at all costs may cause resentment. Since Barcelona does not want you to resent him, he sent me to be your companion in the hope that I might

get some forewarning should your friendship for him begin to weaken."

Just why in this day and age she didn't just come out and say—or think—flatly that she was there to keep me in line, I don't know. But there she was, talking all around the main point and delivering the information by long-winded inference.

Even so, without her Pittsburgh stogie, Tomboy Taylor was a mighty attractive dish, and I knew that she could also be a bright and interesting conversationalist if she wanted to be. Under other circumstances I might have enjoyed the company, but it was no pleasure to know that every grain of her one hundred and fourteen pounds avoirdupois was Barcelona's Personal Property. At that moment I realized that I was not too much concerned with what Barcelona's reaction might be. Instead, I was wishing that things were different so that any activity between us would be for our own personal gain and pleasure rather than the order of or the fight against one Joseph Barcelona. There was one consolation. Tomboy Taylor had not come equipped with a box of Pittsburgh stogies with which to make my appreciation of beauty throw up its lunch.

She said, sweetly, "The better to ensnare you, my dear."

But as she spoke, for just a moment her thick woolly mind shield thinned out enough for me to catch a strange, puzzled grasp for understanding. As if for the first time she had been shown how admiration for physical attractiveness could be both honest and good. That my repugnant attitude over her Pittsburgh stogies was not so much based upon the spoiling of beauty by the addition of ugliness, but the fact that the act itself cheapened her in my eyes.

Then she caught me peeking and clamped down a mind screen that made the old so-called "Iron Curtain" resemble a rusty sieve.

"I'm the one that's supposed to keep track of you, you remember," she said, once more covering up and leaping mentally to the attack.

"I'll remember," I said. "But will you tell me something?"

"Maybe," she said in a veiled attitude.

"Is your boy friend really interested in cleaning up, or is he interested in watching me squirm out of a trap he set for me?"

"In the first place," she said, "I may have been seen in Barcelona's presence but please remember that my association with Mr. Joseph Barcelona has always been strictly on a financial plane. This eliminates the inference contained under the phrase 'Boy Friend.' Check?"

"O.K., Tomboy, if that's the—"

"That's not only the way I want it," she said, "but that's the way it always has been and always will be. Second, I have been getting tired of this nickname 'Tomboy'. If we're going to be racked this close together, you'll grate on my nerves less if you use my right name. It's just plain 'Nora' but I'd like to hear it once in a while."

I nodded soberly. I held out a hand but she put her empty highball glass in it instead of her own little paw. I shrugged and mixed and when I returned and handed it to her I said, "I'll make you a deal. I'll call you 'Nora' just so long as you maintain the manners and attitude of a female, feminine, lady-type woman. I'll treat you like a woman, but you've got to earn it. Is that a deal?"

She looked at me, her expression shy and as defenseless as a bruiser-type caught reading sentimental poetry. I perceived that I had again touched a sensitive spot by demanding that she be more than physically spectacular. Her defenses went down and I saw that she really did not know the answer to my question. I did. It had to do with something that only the achievement of a God-like state—or extreme old age—would change.

This time it was not so much the answer to why little boys walk high fences in front of little girls. It had much more to do with the result of what happens between little boys when the little girl hides her baseball bat and straightens the seams of her stockings when one certain little boy comes into sight. Joseph Barcelona did not admire my ability. He had, therefore, caused me to back myself into a corner where I'd be taken down a peg, shown-up as a second-rater—with the little girl as a witness.

And why had Barcelona been so brash as to send the little girl into my company in order for her to witness my downfall?

Let me tell you about Joe Barcelona.

Normally honest citizens often complain that Barcelona is living high off'n the hawg instead of slugging it out in residence at Stateville, Joliet, Illinois.

With their straight-line approach to simple logic, these citizens argue that the advent of telepathy should have rendered the falsehood impossible, and that perception should enable anybody with half a talent to uncover hidden evidence. Then since Mr. Joseph Barcelona is obviously not languishing in jail, it is patent that the police are not making full use of their talented extrasensory operators, nor the evidence thus collected.

And then after having argued thus, our upstanding citizen will fire off a fast thought to his wife and ask her to invite the neighbors over that evening for a game of bridge.

None of these simple-type of logicians seem to be aware of the rules for bridge or poker that were in force prior to extrasensory training courses. Since no one recognized psionics, the rules did not take telepathy, perception, manipulation, into any consideration whatsoever. Psionics hadn't done away with anything including the old shell game. All psionics had done was to make the game of chance into a game of skill, and made the game of skill into a game of talent that required better control and longer training in order to gain full proficiency.

In Barcelona's case, he had achieved his own apparent immunity by surrounding himself with a number of hirelings who drew a handsome salary for sitting around thinking noisy thoughts. Noisy thoughts, jarring thoughts, stunts like the concentration-interrupter of playing the first twenty notes of Brahms' Lullaby in perfect pitch and timing and then playing the twenty-first note in staccato and a half-tone flat. Making mental contact with Barcelona was approximately the analogue of eavesdropping upon the intimate cooing of a lover sweet-talking his lady in the middle of a sawmill working on an order three days late under a high priority and a penalty clause for delayed delivery.

People who wonder how Barcelona can think for himself with all of that terrific mental racket going on do not know that Barcelona is one

of those very rare birds who can really concentrate to the whole exclusion of any distraction short of a vigorous threat to his physical well-being.

And so his trick of sending Nora Taylor served a threefold purpose. It indicated his contempt for me. It removed Nora from his zone of interference so that she could really witness firsthand my mental squirmings as I watched my own comeuppance bearing down on me. It also gave him double the telepathic contact with me and my counter-plans—if any.

In the latter, you see, Barcelona's way of collecting outside information was to order a temporary cease-fire of the mental noise barrage and then he'd sally forth like a one-man mental commando raid to make a fast grab for what he wanted. Since the best of telepaths cannot read a man's opinion of prunes when he's thinking of peanuts, it is necessary for someone to be thinking of the subject he wants when he makes his raid. Having two in the know and interested doubled his chance for success.

There was also the possibility that Barcelona might consider his deliberate "Leak" to Gimpy Gordon ineffective. Most sensible folks are disinclined to treat Gimpy's delusions of grandeur seriously despite the truth of the cliché that states that a one-to-one correspondence does indeed exist between the perception of smoke and the existence of pyrotic activity. Nora Taylor would add some certification to the rumor. One thing simply had to be: There must be no mistake about placing information in Lieutenant Delancey's hands so as to create the other jaw of the pincers that I was going to be forced to close upon myself.

I tried a gentle poke in the general direction of Barcelona and found that the mental noise was too much to stand. I withdrew just a bit and closed down the opening until the racket was no more than a mental rumor, and I waited. I hunched that Barcelona would be curious to know how his contact-girl was making out, and might be holding a cease-fire early in this phase of the operation. I was right.

The noise diminished with the suddenness of turning off a mental switch, and as it stopped I went in and practically popped Barcelona on the noodle with:

"How-de-do, Joseph."

He recoiled at the unexpected thrust, but came back with: "Wally Wilson! Got a minute?"

I looked at the calendar, counted off the days to Derby Day in my mind and told him that I had that long—at the very least and probably much, much longer.

"Thinks you!"

"Methinks," I replied.

"Wally boy," he returned, "you aren't playing this very smart."

"Suppose you tell me how you'd be playing it," I bounced back at him. "Tell you how I have erred?"

He went vague on me. "If I were of a suspicious nature, I would begin to wonder about certain connective events. For instance, let's hypothecate. Let's say that a certain prominent bookmaker had been suspected of planning to put a fix on a certain important horse race, but of course nothing could be proved. Now from another source we suddenly discover strong evidence to suggest that this bookmaker is not accepting wagers on the horses he is backing, but conversely is busy laying wagers on the same nags through the help of a rather inept go-between."

I grunted aloud which caused Nora Taylor to look up in surprise. I was tempted to say it aloud but I did not. I thought:

"In simple terms, Joseph, you are miffed because I will not cover your bets."

"I thought nothing of the sort."

"Let's hedge? I love you too, Joseph."

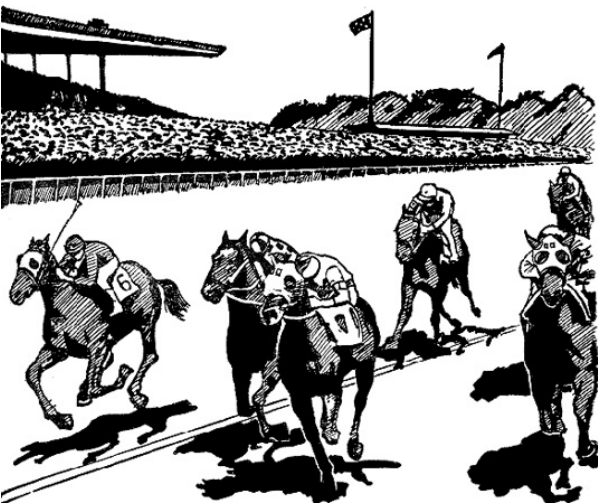
"Well, are you or aren't you?"

"Are I what? Going to top the frosting by financing your little scheme to put the pinch on me?"

"Now, Wally—"

"Can it, Joseph. We're both big boys now and we both know what the score is. You know and I know that the first time I or one of my boys

takes a bet on any one of the three turtles you like, the guy who laid the bet is going to slip the word to one of your outside men. And you're going to leap to the strange conclusion that if Wally Wilson is accepting bets against his own fix, he must know something exceedingly interesting."



"Now, who's been saying anything about a fix, Wally?"

"The people," I thought bluntly, "who have most recently been associated with your clever kind of operator."

"That isn't very nice, Wally."

If it had been a telephone conversation, I'd have slammed the telephone on him. The mealy-mouthed louse and his hypocritical gab was making me mad—and I knew that he was making me mad simply to make me lose control of my blanket. I couldn't stop it, so I let

my anger out by thinking:

"You think you are clever because you're slipping through sly little loopholes, Joseph. I'm going to show you how neat it is to get everything I want including your grudging admission of defeat by the process of making use of the laws and rules that work in my favor."

"You're a wise guy," he hurled back at me.

"I'm real clever, Barcelona. And I'm big enough to face you, even though Phil Howland, The Greek, and Chicago Charlie make like cold clams at the mention of your name."

"Why, you punk—"

"Go away, Barcelona. Go away before I make up my mind to make you eat it."

I turned to Nora Taylor and regarded her charms and attractions both physical and mental with open and glowing admiration. It had the precalculated result and it wouldn't have been a whit different if I'd filed a declaration of intent and forced her to read it first.

It even satisfied my ambient curiosity about what a telepathed grinding of the teeth in frustrated anger would transmit as. And when it managed to occur to an unemployed thought-center of my brain that the lines of battle were soft and sweetly curved indeed, Joseph Barcelona couldn't stand it any more. He just gave a mental sigh and signaled for the noisemakers to shut him off from contact.

Derby Day, the First Saturday in May, dawned warm and clear with a fast, dry track forecast for post time. The doorbell woke me up and I dredged my apartment to identify Nora fiddling in my two-bit kitchen with ham and eggs. Outside it was Lieutenant Delancey practising kinematics by pressing the button with a levitated pencil instead of shoving on the thing directly. (I'd changed the combination on the mindwarden at Nora's suggestion.)

As I struggled out of bed, Nora flashed, "You get it, Wally," at me. She was busy manipulating the ham slicer and the coffee percolator and floating more eggs from the refrigerator. The invitation and the acceptance for and of breakfast was still floating in the mental

atmosphere heavy enough to smell the coffee.

I replied to both of them, "If he can't get in, let him go hungry."

Lieutenant Delancey manipulated the door after I'd reset the mindwarden for him. He came in with a loud verbal greeting that Nora answered by a call from the kitchen. I couldn't hear them because I was in the shower by that time. However, I did ask, "What gives, lieutenant?"

"It's Derby Day."

"Yeah. So what?"

"Going to watch it from here?" he thought incredulously.

"Why not? Be a big jam down there."

"I've a box," he said.

"No ... how—?"

"Both the Derby Association and the Chicago Police Force have assigned me to protect you from the evil doings of sinners," he said with a chuckle. "And I suggested that the best way of keeping an official eye on you was to visit you at the scene of the alleged intended crime and to serve that end they provided me with a box where we can all be together."

I tossed, "And if we do not elect to go to Kentucky?"

He chuckled again. "Then I shall have to arrest you."

"For what?"

"There is an old law in the City Statute that declares something called 'Massive Cohabitation' to be illegal. You have been naughty, Wally."

Nora exploded. "We have not!" she cried.

Lieutenant Delancey laughed like a stage villain. "The law I mention," he said after a bit of belly-laughing, "was passed long, long ago before telepathy and perception were available to provide the truth. At that time the law took the stand that any unmarried couple living together would take advantage of their unchaperoned freedom, and if this state of cohabitation went on for a considerable length of time—called 'Massive' but don't ask me to justify the term—the probability of

their taking pleasure in one another's company approached a one hundred per cent positive probability.

"Now this law was never amended by the Review Act. Hence the fact that you have been chastely occupying separate chambers has nothing to do with the letter of the law that says simply that it is not lawful for an unmarried couple to live under the same unchaperoned roof."

I came out of the shower toweling myself and manipulating a selection of clean clothing out of the closet in my bedroom.

"The law," I observed, "is administered by the *Intent* of the Law, and not by the Letter, isn't it?"

"Oh, sure," he said. "But I'm not qualified to interpret the law. I'll arrest you and bring you to trial and then it's up to some judge to rule upon your purity and innocence of criminal intent, and freedom from moral taint or turpitude. Maybe take weeks, you know."

"And what's the alternative?" I grunted.

"Flight," he said in a sinister tone as I came out of my bedroom putting the last finishes on my necktie. "Flight away from the jurisdiction of the law that proposes to warp the meaning of the law to accomplish its own ends."

"And you?"

"My duty," he grinned, "is to pursue you."

"In which case," observed Nora Taylor, "we might as well fly together and save both time and money."

"That is why I have my personal sky-buggy all ready to go instead of requisitioning an official vehicle," he said. He scooped a fork full of eggs and said, "You're a fool, Wally. The lady can cook."

I chuckled. "And what would happen if I hauled off and married her?"

"You mean right here and now?"

"Yes."

"Sorry. I'd have to restrain you. You see, you couldn't get a legal license nor go through any of the other legal activities, ergo there would be a *prima facie* illegality about some part of the ceremony.

Without being definite as to which phase, I would find it my duty to restrain you from indulging in any act the consummation of which would be illegal."

Nora said in pseudo-petulant tone, "I've been damned with very faint praise."

"How so?"

"Wally Wilson has just said that he'd rather marry me than go to the Kentucky Derby with you."

Lieutenant Delancey said, "I urge you both to come along. You see, my box is also being occupied by an old friend of yours. I managed to talk him into joining us, and with reluctance he consented."

"I'm a mind reader," I said. "Our friend's name is Joseph Barcelona?"

"As they say on the space radio, 'Aye-firm, over and out!'"

Barcelona was there with two of his boys. Watching them were four ununiformed officers. Nora and I and the lieutenant were joined later by Gimpy Gordon, who might have been radiating childlike wonder and a circus-air of excitement at actually being *at* the Derby. He might have been. No one could cut through the constant, maddening mental blah-blah-blah that was being churned out by Barcelona's noisemakers.

He greeted me curtly, eyed Nora hungrily. He said: "You look pretty confident, Wilson."

"I can't lose," I said.

"No? Frankly I don't see how you can win."

I smiled. "Without mentioning any names, Joseph, I feel confident that the final outcome of this racing contest will be just as you want it to be. I shall ask that no credit be given me, although I shall be greatly admired by our mutual friend Miss Nora Taylor who will think that I am truly wonderful for making you happy. And it is more than likely that she may marry me once I have shown you, and she, *and* Lieutenant Delancey, that I am a law-abiding citizen as well as a man who values friendship enough to do as his old pal Joe Barcelona desires."

"It's going to be one of the neatest tricks of the week," he said.

"It will be done by the proper application of laws," I said modestly.

Behind us, Gimpy Gordon light-fingered a half dollar out of Delancey's pocket and was attracting the attention of a hot dog peddler by waving his program. Some folks nearby were eying Barcelona's noisemakers angrily but making very little visible protest once they identified him. Nora was reading her program and underlining some horses. The whole place began to grow into a strange excited silence as the track board began to go up. It was to be a nine-horse race, and at the top of the list were three—count them—three odds-on favorites:

- | | |
|--------------------|-----|
| 1. Murdoch's Hoard | 1:2 |
| 2. Mewhu's Jet | 3:5 |
| 3. Johnny Brack | 5:7 |
| 4. Piper's Son | 8:5 |
| 5. Daymare | 3:1 |
| 6. Helen O'Loy | 8:1 |

And then, of course, there were our three mud turtles which must have been entered by someone who thought that the Kentucky Derby was a claiming race and who hoped that the LePage's Glue people would make a bid for the three mounds of thoroughbred horseflesh that dropped dead in the backstretch:

- | | |
|-----------------|-------|
| 7. Flying Heels | 100:1 |
| 8. Moonbeam | 250:1 |
| 9. Lady Grace | 500:1 |

The rack hadn't hit the top of the slide before there was a sort of mass-movement towards the mutuel windows. The ones who didn't go in person tried to hurl betting-thoughts in the hope of getting there early and failing this they arose and followed the crowd. Slowly the odds began to change; the figures on our three platers began to rise. There was very little activity on the other six horses. Slow-thinking Gimpy Gordon started to get up but I put out a hand to stop him.

"But the odds are dropping," he complained.

"Gimpy," I said, "they pay on the final listing anyway. But would you like a tip?"

"Sure," he said nervously.

"My tip is to keep your cash in your pocket. Put it on the nose of some horse and it's likely to get blown away by a high wind."

The odds were changing rapidly. What with psionic information receivers, trend predictors and estimated anticipators, the mutual computers kept up with the physical transfer of funds, figured out the latest odds, and flipped the figures as fast as the machinery could work the dials. In no more than a few minutes the odds on the three platers looked more like the odds on horses that stood a chance of winning.

Barcelona looked at me. "What did you do, wise guy?"

"Who ... me? Why, I didn't do anything that you did not start—except that maybe I was a little more generous."

"*Spiel!*" he snarled.

"Why, shucks, Joseph. All I did was to slip good old Gimpy Gordon a tip."

"How much?"

"Just a lousy little thousand dollar bill."

"A grand! For what, wise guy?"

"Why, just for telling me what horses you picked for the Derby."

Barcelona looked at the odds on his horses. Flying Heels had passed even money and was heading for a one-to-two odds-on. The other platers were following accordingly.

"And what did you tell Gimpy, Wilson?"

"You tell him, Gimp," I said.

"Why, Wilson just said that we should ride along with you, Mr. Barcelona, because you are such a nice guy that everybody works awfully hard to see that you get what you want."

"There's more!" roared Barcelona.

"Only that I shouldn't mention it to anybody, and that I shouldn't place my bet until the mutuel windows open because if I did it would louse up the odds and make you unhappy." Gimpy looked at Barcelona's stormy face and he grew frightened. "Honest, Mr. Barcelona, I didn't say a word to nobody. Not a word." He turned to me and whined plaintively, "You tell him, Mr. Wilson. I didn't say a word."

I soothed him. "We know you didn't, Gimpy."

Barcelona exploded. "Ye Gods!" he howled. "They used that gimmick on me when I lost my first baby tooth. 'Don't put your tongue in the vacant place,' they said, 'and don't think of the words *Gold Tooth* and it'll grow in natural gold!'"

As he spoke the odds on Flying Heels changed from a staggering One-to-Eight to an even more staggering One-to-Ten. That meant that anybody holding less than a ten-dollar bet on such a winner would only get his own money back because the track does not insult its clients by weighing them down with coins in the form of small change. They keep the change and call it "Breakage" for any amount over an even-dollar money.

Delancey said to Barcelona, "You have had it, Joseph."

Barcelona snarled, "Put the big arm on Wilson here. He's the fast man with the big fix."

"Wilson didn't fix any race, Joseph. He just parlayed some of the laws of human nature into a win for himself and a lose for you."

"Now see here—what's this guff about human nature?"

"Well, there's the human desire to ride with a winner, and the human frailty that hopes to get something for nothing. To say nothing of the great human desire to be 'On the Inside' track or 'In the Know' so that they can bet on the 'Sure Thing'. And so," said Delancey, "we've about twenty thousand human beings full of human nature holding tickets on your three dogs, Joseph. They bet their money because the 'Inside Dope' said that the big fix was in. And I can tell you that what twenty thousand people are going to do to this 'Inside Dope' when their nags run last is going to make Torquemada ask permission to return to life for a Second Inquisition, this time with extrasensory tortures." He turned to me as Barcelona went pale. "Wally," he asked, "want to bet that someone doesn't remember that old question of

whether it is possible to break every bone in a man's body without killing him?"

"I'd be a fool to cover that one," I said. "But I'll play even money and on either side of whether Joseph dies or lives through the process."

"Stop it!" screamed Barcelona. He grabbed me by the arm. "Wilson," he pleaded, "Can you? Stop it, I mean? Can you fix it?"

"Sure," I said.

"Legally?"

"Yep. But it'll cost you."

"Just money?"

"Just money—and admitting that you lost, Joseph!"

"I lose," he said. "Go ahead!"

"O.K., Joseph. Now, let's be real honest. Those three longshore turtles belong to you, don't they?"

"Yes."

"And right now you wouldn't even want to see them run, would you? In fact, you really want that they shouldn't run."

"Yes."

"All right, Joseph. Call off your noisemakers and toss the Head Steward a thought. Tell him you're scratching your entries."

"But that won't stop the people from losing their money."

"Natch. So next you broadcast a thought that because of this terrible, grievous error you are refunding their money out of your own pocket since the Track Association will not or is not obliged to."

He turned to his pair of rattleheads and snarled, "All right. Shut up!"

A mental silence fell that was like the peace of rest after a busy day. As Barcelona was tossing his cancellation at the Steward and preparing to make a full and plausible explanation to the gambling instinct of the Kentucky Derby crowd, I considered the matter carefully:

"Let's see," I thought. "He wants 'em not to run and so he can't complain to me if they do not. I didn't fix the race, so Lieutenant Delancey can't accuse me of that. That makes everybody happy, and I win!"

A small hand stole into mine. "How about me, Wally?" Nora asked sweetly.

I looked down at a thionite dream come true by the glow in her eyes that admired no one else but me. "You're mine," I reminded her, "until Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace win One, Two, and Three at the Kentucky Derby."

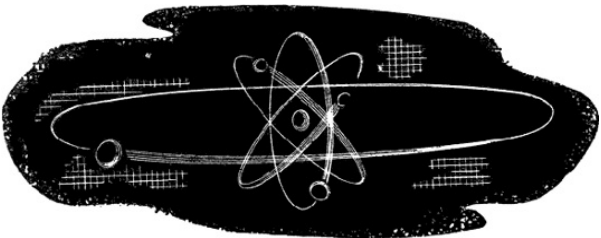
"Or," she said mischievously, "'Til death do us part!"

I was instructing her how to respond to a kiss as a lady should respond when about two hundred thousand noisy, exuberant human natures yelled and radiated and thought: "They're Off!"

But they didn't mean us. They were watching a bunch of long-faced hayburners chasing one another around a dusty track.

Human nature ain't changed a bit. It's just more complicated in an extrasensory sort of way.

THE END



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