

# Somebody Has to Die

By J. J. CLIFF



Farber's face was ashen as he slowly lifted the gun . . .  
94

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**T**AKE it from me, Buggsy Malone, the City Morgue was anything but quiet the night Ace Johnson went down to identify his brother on a slab. The place was alive with cops. All one of them had to do was to flourish a rod and yell, "This is a raid!" and I'd think it was old home week.

I took a gander around. Casing the place, so's to speak. Like the Ace, himself, used to tell me to do in the old days. A smart guy never goes into something blind, he used to say. Use your eyes first, then your head. It'll always give you the jump on the other guy. It had always worked.

But that was in the old days—when the Ace was king of the deck, and I was his right

hand. That was before Molly and the war. . . .

Jeez, time flies! Four years went up the old smoke since Ace had closed his book, married Molly, and marched off to do his country some good. And—come to think of it—two days now since he'd marched back with a medical discharge in his pocket—and I hadn't even seem him yet.

My glims finally focussed on what I was looking for—a broad-shouldered flatfoot, who gave me the nod and ambled over. Inspector Rupp, the Vice Squad dick. I wondered what he was doing at the morgue.

I gave him the glad hand. "H'ya, Inspector!"

Rupp grunted, sourly. "Hello, rat!"

I never had understood why the Ace thought this copper was such a right guy, but I kept on grinning anyway. That's the way the Ace would have done it.

So I said: "Whatcha know?"

Rupp drawled, "Funny thing, I was just gonna ask you the same thing."

I shrugged. "Where's the Ace? In the cooler?"

He side-stepped that one. "I asked you a question, Buggsy—"

"Ain't you a bit out of your line?"

"At a killing, you mean?" Rupp gave me a toothy smile. "A man who can recognize a card shark like you, Buggsy, can be invaluable to Homicide at a time like this. Get it?"

He wasn't kidding, either. He knew Ace's kind—big time gamblers like Angie Farber, Big Joe Heinz, Leo Conti—better than their mothers even. He knew the weight, size, and general description of every goon that ever threw a pair of dice for money and got himself on the police blotter for it. Maybe that's why he was an inspector.

Rupp was talking again. "What are you here for, Buggsy? What's the Ace want with you?"

This was a laugh. What'd the flat-foot expect me to do? Tell him why I had to see the Ace but quick? Let him know the whole West Side was so tense since the Ace's brother got his, that it would blow up if somebody spit in the wrong direction? Ace wouldn't. Neither would I.

So I said, "The Ace don't want nothing with me. Honest, this visit was my own idea. After all, I was pretty close to the Ace, and—"

"Cut it, Buggsy!" Rupp shoved his chin into my face. "You're not down here for your health." I opened my mouth. "And don't try to tell me you're here to greet an old pal, either!"

I STARTED to shrug again, but got all tangled

up in my own coat. The Inspector seemed to be trying to wring it around my neck.

"Hey, look—" I sputtered and tried again. "Look, Rump—"

"Rupp, you rat—"

"I meant Rupp . . . look, I don't know a thing, honest! It's like I said. I—"

"You don't know the Ace's brother got his tonight, do you—"

"Sure, but—"

"You ain't got no idea what the Ace is planning to do—"

"How should I—"

"—or who he's planning to wipe out for it, have you? Don't dummy up, you cheap tin-horn, we know all about it!"

"The Ace did send for you, didn't he? He wants you to take care of Angie Farber for him, don't he? That's what you came down here for, ain't it? Come on, you cheap punk, talk!"

How the hell could I—with him shaking me like a cherry tree he was planning to harvest!

I coulda killed him with my bare hands. But I didn't. The Ace used to say, control was the thing. So I controlled myself. I even whined. I knew that ape of a cop would leave me alone, if I whined.

"Don't know a thing, I tell ya!" I pulled away from him.

He stepped back then. "All right. But I'm warning you tin-horns. The law knows there was a murder tonight. Let the law take its course."

I smiled faintly, while smoothing out my new two-bill tweed. "Why don't'cha tell that to the Ace, Rump—"

"Rupp, you—"

"Rupp," I corrected, hastily. "He'd be glad to know."

Inspector Rupp let that sink in, then nodded. "All right, Buggsy, on your way."

And I was beating it before he changed his mind—down the corridor, through a pair

of white swinging doors, into a room which, from ceiling to floor, was one mess of white, marble drawers. Human iceboxes. I shuddered.

Then I saw the Ace. He was standing next to one of them pulled out full length. Molly, his wife, was there, too, sobbing softly. So was a copper I recognized from Homicide, a dick whose name I couldn't ball up—Smith.

The sight of the open drawer froze me to the floor, five feet inside. Not that I was especially scared of stiffs; but from where I stood, it looked like a family affair. Besides, who would have wanted to intrude at a time like this?

I was backing out, but that gumshoe, Rupp, wouldn't have it that way. "Inside, Buggsy," he said, suddenly shoving me from behind. "All the way in."

He walked in, pushing me ahead of him. "Here's a friend of yours, Ace," he said. "Buggsy Malone, paying his respects. He wants to help you bury your dead."

FOR the second time, I almost lost my self control. Imagine that lousy flatfoot following right behind me! I coulda knocked his teeth out! But when I saw the Ace pivot around on Molly's arm, I stopped fighting off Rupp's shoves.

He was a changed man, the Ace was. Not because he stood any straighter, or because he looked a lot healthier with that bronzed face of his. Or even because his hair was turned white at the temples. It was something else.

There was something about his face, for instance, that seemed all wrong somehow. I didn't know what. But it was there. The dark creases which lined his face, maybe. Or maybe, it was in his eyes.

I felt peculiar—the way he stared at me. He seemed to be looking over me—not at me. And not a muscle in his face so much as twitched in recognition. The Ace always had a

rep for being a poker face, but this was hell—for me.

The moment I heard his voice, though, I felt better. It was the old Ace all right.

"Hello, Buggsy," he said, kinda low and husky. "Long time, no see."

"H'ya, pal!" I went for his hand. And when I say "went" I mean that, literally. I practically had to pick it up from his side before I got the squeeze. It gave me the jim-jams for a minute. The Ace was a tough guy when he was sore. I wouldn't have wanted him sore at me—ever.

I tried a grin. "Anything I can do for you, Ace? That's what I come down here for, fella." He didn't say anything. "A helluva business two days after you get out of the army. Can't I do anything? Just say the word, Ace—"

"You're too anxious, Buggsy," Rupp butted in. "What makes you so anxious?"

Oh, how I would've loved to bust that cop one! But I ignored him. Instead, I turned to the Ace. "It's just like that between us, ain't it, Ace? I was Ace's pal, his right hand boy"—I turned to Molly—"wasn't I, Molly?"

Molly didn't say anything. She just kept looking at the Ace.

Molly and me never got along anyhow. I always felt that she was responsible for taking Ace away from the cards. She was always after him to quit. Wouldn't marry him unless he did.

It beat me! As if it wasn't honest! Ace never ran a crooked game in his life. He almost broke my arm once for trying to deal seconds—and I was dealing for him! Can you imagine that? But Molly never could see it that way.

I was glad when the Ace finally spoke up. "I knew I could count on you to show up, Buggsy."

"Any time, Ace. Any time." I lowered my voice. "You got something on tap, Ace?"

"Yeah, Buggsy."

“Maybe . . . maybe, you want to get out of here so we can talk in private, huh?” I shot Rupp a dirty look.

I HAD a lot to tell the Ace. That West Side uproar, for one thing. Then, Angie Farber. Yeah, Inspector Rump or Rupp, whatever his name was, gave me the reminder. I had plenty to tell the Ace about Angie Farber, but I damn well couldn't do it in front of the cops. Besides, I was anxious to get out of the joint. That open slab with the Ace's brother on it didn't make the place any more cheerful.

I was standing close to the Ace, when he grabbed my coat lapels. “Do something for me first, Buggsy,” the Ace said. “Identify my brother.”

I choked. “Who, me? What's the matter with you?”

The Ace seemed to look right through me. “I did, but it isn't enough for the good Detective Smith. He wants one more.”

Smith looked at me and nodded.

I looked at Molly. “Didn't she know him? What's the matter with her?”

Rupp curled up that sneer of his again. “Afraid of ghosts, Buggsy?”

That did it. “Okay,” I said, hoarsely, “lead me to him.”

Rupp grunted. “Lead yourself over to him. He ain't gonna jump out and bite.”

My insides caved in at that. Not that I was afraid of corpses. I just didn't want no truck with them. But I could see Smith and that damn Rupp looking at me. And Molly whispering to the Ace.

I walked over slowly, shaking like a leaf. It seemed like a mile. Then, suddenly, there I was. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, ducked my head in and out again—fast.

“Yep, that's him,” I said. I looked at the Ace. He was smiling.

IT WAS a relief to get out of that place and over to Ace's apartment on the West Side.

What with the experience I had at the morgue, and those damn cops insisting on driving us home, it was wonderful to be able to draw a free breath again. Besides, I had things to tell Ace. But first things first. I needed a drink. And I asked for one—a big, tall one.

Ace said, “Help yourself.” He got himself comfortable in a plush easy chair next to a phony fireplace, while I poured myself a husky three-fingers of scotch. I took a-quick swig to stop my shakes.

I suppose the Ace noticed when I set my drink down. The ice tinkled all over the place. “Sounds like you got it bad, Buggsy,” he murmured.

“Excitement, Ace.” I licked my lips. “About your brother, I mean.”

I sized him up, using his own formula on him. That “use your eyes and head” stuff. I couldn't help it. Somehow I felt I had to get to know the Ace all over again.

Ace stared at the ceiling. “If you know something, Buggsy, spill it!”

I hesitated. Molly was still in the room. I looked at her significantly. She returned my look defiantly.

“If you think for one minute that I'm going to leave this room, Buggsy Malone, you're highly mistaken,” she said. “If anybody goes, it'll be you, you no-good—”

Ace looked tired. “Molly, please.” He said to me, “Molly will stay, Buggsy. Spill what you have to say.”

I cleared my throat. “First I want to know one thing before I begin, Ace. It's important to me considering what I got to say. I could get pushed out of this world for even whispering it—”

He nodded. “Whaddya want to know?”

“How do I stand with you, Ace?”

“Ace high.” He smiled faintly.

“Figure I deal you straight?”

“When I make you—yes.”

“Can we make a deal?”

“What kind of a deal?”

“That you get the rat that rubbed out your brother—if I name him. I’ll feel safer considering—”

Ace nodded. “I’ll get the killer, Buggsy—no matter where he is—I’ll get him. I promise you that!”

I swallowed, and took the plunge. “Angie Farber,” I whispered.

THE Ace never moved. But I had expected that. The Ace was never one for emotion. “How do you figure?” he asked tonelessly.

“I figure your brother was knifed by a guy who hated his guts and liked yours even less.”

I thought he was going to say something, but he didn’t. He just nodded, and motioned me to go on.

“I figure it was because of the gravy he could get. When you went away—with the gee-gees, the numbers collections, those two West Side gambling joints, and the side games at the Mills Hotel—you left a million dollar business for somebody to inherit.”

“What’s that got to do with my brother?”

I coughed politely. “Didn’t you know, Ace? Hell, I didn’t mean—”

“Say what you mean, Buggsy.”

“Well ... I hate to be the first one to break the news to you, Ace, but your brother had a notion that he was going to take up where you left off.” I looked at Molly. “Didn’t she tell you? I mean, Molly knew about it—”

Molly cried, “I was going to tell you about it, Ace, but I couldn’t—not just after—” Molly looked at him anxiously, but the Ace just waved me to go on.

“I figure the stakes were just high enough for somebody to object.”

“Angie Farber?”

“Right!”

The Ace was thoughtful. “You figure a lot, don’t you, Buggsy? Is it all figuring—or do you have the facts?”

I fidgeted. “Sure, I do.”

“Why Farber then? Why not Conti or Big Joe Heinz? Seems I remember them always trying to cut in on my ‘take’ in old days.”

This was the cue I’d been waiting for. I leaned over confidentially. “Because I saw Angie Farber pull a gun on your brother two hours before he was killed!”

As far as Ace’s expression was concerned, the bombshell I just exploded was a dud. He was like a wooden Indian. I stared at him, speechless. But he didn’t offer to say anything, I went on:

“It was like this, Ace. Your kid brother always felt that he was the guy to take your place. Even when they found Big Joe in an alley with a knife through his gut, it didn’t change his mind any—excepting maybe to plan a little more subtle.

“You see, Ace, it was his idea to taunt Farber and Conti into a game of high card—one pick—winner takes all. He had all the angles figured—even to having me sit in—so’s we’d have two chances to win instead of one. I don’t know how he swung it, but last night Conti and Angie Farber showed up at the Mills Hotel to accept his dare.”

I STOPPED to see how the Ace was taking it. I guess he sensed because he motioned impatiently for me to get on.

“Well, everybody knew it was a quickie, see, so we got right down to business. Angie was first and pulled an ace. Conti and me drew low ones, and then it was your brother’s turn. He reached and flipped a card over. It was a bullet. That was when Farber pulled his gun!

“He claimed your brother pulled a fast one, that he buffed the ace beforehand so’s he could slice it out of the deck. You know what that means, Ace. Me and Conti had all we could do to keep Farber from plugging the kid on the spot.”

The Ace’s voice was low and strained,

I thought. “Anybody see the kid get it?”

I shook my head.

“Eh, Buggsy?”

“Jeez, no! Even if they did, they’d dummy up.”

“Yeah, sure.”

I felt kinda funny. “Ain’tcha gonna do anything about it?” The Ace had closed his eyes like he was sleeping.

That’s when Molly butted in. “No, he’s not! Ace is clean now. He’s getting a fresh start. He’s had enough—”

I shot back, “I didn’t mean for him to do it, personally. Some of the boys on the West Side ain’t cripples—”

Ace nodded to me like he didn’t hear her. “What’s on your mind, Buggsy?”

I turned my two thumbs down.

“Ace!” Molly was suddenly at his side. “Don’t let him talk you into it. It’s murder—nothing less than murder!”

But the Ace didn’t pay any attention. “How?” he asked me.

“Knife.”

For the first time, Ace showed he was alive. “No,” he whispered, huskily, “that would be too easy for the guy. I got a better idea.”

He smiled. “Yep, that’s what we’re gonna do, Buggsy. We’re gonna give the killer a little bit of the army treatment.”

I didn’t get it. “Army treatment? What’s that?”

“A little bit of the old psychological warfare business, Buggsy. You wouldn’t understand.”

I was getting sore. What’d he take me for, a mugg? “What wouldn’t I understand Ace? Ain’t you gonna get Farber?”

“We’ll get the killer all right, but first we’ll wear him a little thin. Worry him a little, understand?”

I grinned. “Sure, Ace.”

“And, Buggsy—you can help.”

I leaned forward. “What’s the pitch?”

“Organize a game for tomorrow night—same game—same players. That means you, too.”

I shrugged. “Sure—whatever you say.” I looked at him quizzically. “Got an idea?”

That far-away look of his seemed more pronounced than ever before. “A little something I picked up overseas.” The Ace smiled. “It’ll kill them.”

I looked at the Ace. Then, I smiled, too. “Bet it would at that . . .”

KILLING a couple of hours before the game was scheduled to begin wasn’t hard. You see, I had looked up what “psychological warfare” meant. And the way I took it, it meant teasing the enemy and then hitting him where he least expected it. So I elected myself to spread a little propaganda. And to make sure that Farber would get wind of it, I decided to work on him first.

Farber’s favorite flop—Louie’s Poolroom—was within throwing distance from my place. So I ambled over.

The minute I closed the door behind me, I began to make use of the old “use your eyes and head” stuff. I looked around. Farber was shooting a game of pool. His back was towards me but I knew it didn’t mean a thing. Three of his gunsels were lounging around—but with their eyes glued to the door and their hands in their pockets. I picked them out right off. When they saw it was me, they relaxed—but not much. I took it as a good sign, and headed straight for Farber.

Angie was trying for the number four ball in the side pocket, when I murmured, “H’ya, Angie.” He almost plowed Louie’s best table under.

Then he saw me. “Hello, stupid.” He took a few preliminary pokes at the four ball. “You don’t feel like living, do you?” And he sunk it with as beautiful a shot as I ever saw.

I grunted. “I’ll get by. The point is—will you?”

Farber studied his next shot. “Your ex-boss,” he muttered, bending down to sight his next shot, “will be your late boss, if he tries to get funny with me.”

“Just like that, huh?”

“Just like—that!” The number ten ball disappeared like a comet into the corner pocket. He straightened up. “Suppose you tell him that.”

I followed him around the table. “Supposing I didn’t come down here to tell him anything, Angie. Supposing I just came down here to talk to you. What then?”

He stopped lining up his next shot to give me the once over. “What about?”

I shrugged indifferently. “Lotsa things.”

“F’r instance what?”

“The Ace thinks you rubbed out his brother.”

“He’s crazy.” Farber chalked up. “I didn’t gun his brother.”

“Nevertheless, he’s been bragging.”

Farber leaned on his stick. “What’s the pitch, Buggsy? Whatcha selling?”

“Advice.” I looked at him; Farber started to play again. I thought for a minute he wasn’t listening. Then he looked up.

“For how much?”

I had to think fast. Anything to get him to listen. “Half,” I said, adding, “It’s worth your life, ain’t it?”

“Say your piece.”

I warmed up. “Sure, Angie. That’s what I came down here for.” I watched him drop the number six ball. “There’ll be a game tonight—same place, same stakes. Ace figures on being there, too. He’ll be laying for you.”

“What’s he expect to do?”

“I don’t know exactly.” I followed him around the table again. “But if your punks were in the lobby about the time he came in, what’s the diff?”

We looked down each other’s throat for a second. Then, he laughed. “You’re nuts,

and so’s he. G’wan and leave me alone, Buggsy. You bother me. I can take your Ace when I want to ... where I want to ... any day in the week. Go peddle your apples elsewhere. Maybe Conti will buy them. Try him.”

“Sure, sure, Angie, anything you say. But—” I picked up the black ball in front of his next shot. “That’s the eight ball, Angie. You were behind it.” And I handed it to him.

It was a good thing I ducked. . . .

I FELT good. Farber was scared stiff. But it was more than just frightening Angie that made me feel like a million. It was an idea I suddenly got—or rather Farber gave me.

I had no idea what the Ace had in store for Angie—excepting maybe to kill him. That was okay with me, but for one thing. What about Leo Conti? It dawned on me that there was one guy who’d actually be sitting pretty even if Angie did get his.

He had been sitting in the game the other night with the Ace’s kid brother. He had been shooting for the same high stakes. Why include him out? I wouldn’t’ve, if I was the Ace. So I didn’t.

This time I did my scaring via the Bell system. And the nickel I invested was well worth it. When I got through talking to Fat Leo, he must’ve aged five years. I could tell by his voice.

While I was in the booth, I killed another idea. This was so good, I couldn’t wait to put my nickel in the slot. Although—when a booming voice yapped “Police Headquarters” at me, my stomach did a jackknife.

“Inspector Rump,” I said in a small voice. And while I was waiting, I thought my angle over again. What if the Ace’s idea went sour? What would we have then? Trouble. Especially Farber trouble. Calling the police then was a stroke of genius on my part. Just in case. . . .

I heard a click, and then I had the Inspector.

For a moment I didn't know what to do with him. Then I said, "Inspector Rump?"

There was a pause, and then he boomed, "Yeah. Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am," I said. "This is a tip-off. There'll be a big game tonight at the Mills Hotel, Room 212. Don't say I told you."

"What's your name again?" I grinned. "I didn't say. But if you wanta get big shots all in one sweep, you better set your ticker for ten o'clock on the nose."

"I see." Again, the pause. "Would you please repeat that address again, I—"

I slammed down the receiver. That was an old stall. Besides, if I wanted him to find out who it was in the first place, I woulda told him. . . .

BY NINE o'clock, Room 212 was already full of smoke and a game of three-handed stud was well on its way. Although I'd take a bet that nobody in that room had his mind on the game, anyway. I could tell by the way I was winning.

Hawk-faced Angie Farber, you could see, had his mind more on the gun in his pocket than he did on the five pasteboards in front of him. Same for Leo Conti. Greasy Leo got greasier as the time went by. Not that I was any exception, either. I was waiting for the Ace to show, too.

Then the surprises came—thick and fast. Drawing another queen to join my other pair of ladies was one of them. The other was the Ace.

When I saw him, he was standing in the doorway with a cane and a pair of black cheaters over his eyes. But Angie had seen him first—and his gun was out.

But the Ace seemed unperturbed. "H'ya, boys," he said.

Angie waved his gun. "Come in and close the door, Ace. You're covered."

Ace turned towards Angie. "Nice to

know, Angie. How are you?"

I shook my head. That Ace was certainly a cool one. A little stupid, though—muffing his own "use your eyes and head" gag. It let Angie get the jump on him.

Angie motioned to Leo. "Get his gun, Leo."

Ace grinned. "Hello, fat stuff, how've ya been?" He let Leo disarm him.

Conti grunted.

I wanted to let the Ace know I was around, too. So far he hadn't seemed to notice me. "H'ya, Ace," I said. "What's the get-up for?"

Ace took a few faltering steps, tapping his cane as he went—like a blind man. "For the benefit of a couple of hoods Angie left loose in the lobby," he said.

I was wondering how the Ace had gotten past them. I had seen them myself when I came in. So now I knew. I had to laugh. I could just see the Ace tapping right past those dumb gunsels. It made a funny picture.

Farber looked at me. "It ain't funny, Buggsy." Then, he shifted his gaze to the Ace. "Not funny at all." He walked over to Ace, then suddenly slapped him with the back of his hand. "Wipe that grin off your face, and close the door!"

WHEN the Ace didn't move, Farber started to smack him again. Something he saw changed his mind. I turned around to see. That's when I got my next surprise.

It was Molly. And with a gun leveled at Farber's breadbasket.

"I'll close the door," she said. "Now drop it!" What with her trigger finger doing a convulsion, Angie had no other choice. His gun clattered to the floor. Molly kicked the door shut and backed up against the wall.

Ace smiled. "First we'll collect the hardware. Buggsy, will you do the honors?"

Would I? I moved with a great deal

more alacrity than the situation called for. “Anything for a pal, Ace.”

Greasy Leo had one, too. I collected his along with Farber’s and stacked them on the table. “There you are.”

“Yours, too,” Molly piped, from her position near the door.

I looked at her, a little hurt. “Now what would I be doing with a gun, Molly? You know me better than that.”

Ace grunted. “Sure we do. You never use ’em, do you, Buggsy?”

“Honest, Ace, I’m clean.”

Angie got fidgety. “All right, Ace, cut the small talk. It’s your play. Where do we go from here? If its the rackets you want, they’re yours—hands off. Right, boys?”

Conti nodded vigorously. “Sure thing, Ace. I don’t want no part of them.”

This was getting funnier by the minute. Never before had I ever seen the boys in such complete accord. And I don’t believe it could ever happen again either. This was something to see.

Farber looked at the Ace. “You see how things are?”

Ace ignored him. “I want my brother’s killer.”

Nobody said nothing—not even me. Though I was sure wondering why the Ace wasn’t burning Farber down this minute. Especially after all I told him.

Ace’s face was a mask. “Nobody talking?”

I found myself wishing he’d take those damn glasses off. I couldn’t tell who he was looking at. And I certainly wished it wasn’t me.

Ace’s lips barely moved. “Like that, eh? Give me that gun, Molly—”

Farber’s face twitched. “Now, wait a minute, Ace. Give us a chance. I know you’ve been gunning for me. I know you think I got your brother, but you’re wrong—dead wrong. You gotta believe me. I wasn’t near your kid

brother. I—”

Ace broke in, “Give you a chance? Sure I’ll give you a chance. I got all night.”

NOT much you haven’t, I thought. I looked at my watch. Twenty to ten. If the Ace was gonna do anything, he was gonna have to do it in twenty minutes. After that—that’s all, brother—

Not that I cared. But once the cops came, the chances of getting out of here would be slim. I had a notion to remind Ace what I told him about Farber pulling a gun on the kid, but I didn’t dare. I figured it was safer to say nothing just in case Farber wiggled out. Plenty of time for that, later.

“As a matter of fact,” the Ace was saying, “I’ll give all of you a sporting chance to walk out of here in one piece—all except one. He won’t be able to walk. How’s that sound?”

Not so good. I swallowed hard. He wasn’t talking to Farber any more. He was talking plural—and that meant me, included.

I watched the Ace carefully. He found himself a chair and sat down slowly. I started to sweat. Those jerky movements of his—what if he was shell-shocked or something? Good God, he could—

“One of you guys,” he began, “murdered my brother. No use denying it—it couldn’t have been anybody else. Nobody else could’ve had a better motive. Nobody else had a better opportunity. You were the last persons to see my brother alive.”

He let that sink in, then went on: “But I don’t know which one of you did it, so I’m going to give you a chance—more’n the killer gave my brother. You call yourselves gamblers. Okay, let’s see if you are. I got a new game for you—something I brought back with me. In this game, the winner loses!”

He motioned to Molly. “Take those guns off the table. The boys are going to play a little game of ‘high card’— with a new

twist. Something I was telling Buggsy about. You remember, don't you, Buggsy?"

I nodded stupidly. What else could I have done?

"Break out a fresh deck, Buggsy," the Ace directed.

"We gotta have a nice, clean deck for this game—and a gun—"

My blood stopped circulating—especially when I took a good look at that gun in his mitt. It was an old type six-shooter, but it looked mean. I did as I was told. I decided I had nothing to lose playing along. He still seemed friendly to me.

Fat Leo was losing weight fast. "Now look, Ace, I don't know what it's all about but—"

"You will, Leo." The Ace smiled frozenly. "Just let me demonstrate."

"You want I should shuffle 'em, Ace?" I asked. I suddenly decided that I wanted to let him know that I was still on his side. He looked like he needed prompting.

"Do that, Buggsy."

I shuffled. "All set, Ace."

"Not quite, Buggsy," Ace said, tight-lipped. "I gotta explain the game to the boys."

Farber took a couple of steps to protest. "Now, look—" That's as far as he got. Molly's frantic gesture with the business end of her automatic finished his speech—but quick.

Ace ignored the play. "Ever hear of Russian poker, boys? No? Great game. Makes anything you tin-horns ever played look like Parcheesi—"

I remembered the cops again. And Ace was dragging it out too long. "Look, Ace, I—" I didn't get any farther than Farber.

Ace continued: "Let me show you how they played it. First, they took all the cartridges out of a gun except one. Then, they spun the cartridge chamber until nobody knew where the slug was. And then . . . then they took turns putting the rod to their heads and

pulling the trigger. Somebody always died. . . ."

MAYBE staring ain't polite. But my eyes bulged at the sight of the Ace deftly suiting his words with action. When the Ace snapped that pistol shut, I wouldn't have given a plugged cent for the odds. . . .

"Get the idea, boys? You'll cut for your turn—"

Leo wheezed, the sweat pouring down the sides of his face. "All right, Ace, so you're having fun. Now, what's the gag?"

"No gag, Leo."

Leo mopped his brow. "But this is murder, Ace—nothing but murder!"

"So was my brother's death."

Leo was wailing now. "But I didn't kill him. Why should I have to take the rap—"

Ace snapped, "You don't. Not if you talk. Who did it, Leo?"

Leo eyed Molly. Then, he shifted to the Ace. His lips trembled. But he didn't say a word.

The Ace waited for a minute. Then he nodded slowly. "Won't need you any more, Molly," he said, without turning. "You know what to do."

Molly was at his side—but slowly and carefully. "Ace, I—"

"Just give me your gun, Molly. What's going to happen here won't be nice for you to see." I looked at the Ace. His face was a grim mask. And when I heard Molly close the door, it sounded like a death knell.

Ace heard it, too. With a quick shift, he gripped Molly's automatic in his right hand, and tossed the ancient gat on the table with his left. "There it is, boys. Cut for it!" I straightened up, electrified. It took me a second to get my tongue untwisted.

"Hey," I yapped. "Hold your horses! You don't mean me, too, now, do you, Ace? I'm your pal. I didn't have nothing to do with your brother getting knocked off!"

“Everybody plays,” Ace said, shortly. “Everybody who played with my brother the other night—no exceptions!”

I was getting panicky, and I knew it. Crazy ideas like accusing Farber in the open circulated around in my brain and tried to get out of my mouth. But there they died. If they didn’t, ten to one, I would—if Farber survived.

Yet I had to do something. I started to use my eyes and my head. That is, I tried to. But the best I could manage was a shaky laugh.

“You’re kidding, Ace.” I laughed a little louder. “Some gag, fella—”

Ace sighed. “Pick a card, Buggsy. High man’s last. Ready?”

THE bottom dropped out; I sat down in a heap. A hopeless feeling crawled over me. I began to shake. Ace was in dead earnest. About me playing, too. I tried to think of an out, but I couldn’t think. I only saw the bright, new deck of cards on the table.

I said, hoarsely, “Lemme shuffle ’em again.”

Ace shrugged. “It’s your life.” I shuffled slowly, marking time. A glance down at my watch showed me that the cops had plenty of time—too much. I couldn’t stall very much, and yet ...

I got a grip on myself. There must be something I could do. But what? What! Use your eyes ... use your head ... the damn words kept rushing through my brain.

I looked at the Ace. He seemed to detach himself from the whole business. He was his usual calm self. Didn’t seem to notice me. Hadn’t bothered to notice anybody all night. I began to wonder if the answer wasn’t in the Ace, himself.

Sure, could be. That far-away look of his last night. That glassy look in his eyes. And his medical discharge. Could be that he’s a little “psychological” case himself. Could be

even that he was getting kill-crazy. I had heard about cases like that. I looked at the Ace again. Could be. ...

I swallowed hard. “Okay, I’m ready.” Was that my voice? It hadn’t sounded like me.

The Ace nodded. “Then pick a card.”

I smiled. Sure, I’d pick a card. Hell, hadn’t I shuffled? And hadn’t I roughed up the edge of an ace? That used to be my business.

I stretched for the deck, and sliced it clean. Then I turned up my card for inspection.

“A bullet, my friends.” I shot a quick look at the Ace. “Not the kind you expected I’d get, Ace.”

The Ace waved his gun. “Leo?”

Fatso stopped chewing his cigar. His hand started to reach for the deck, but it never got there.

“I can’t, Ace,” he whined. “Don’t make me—”

“You can still make a deal, Leo. Confess. Confess and I’ll let the cops take you alive.”

He waited.

I looked at Leo. He sighed like a deflated balloon. Then, he sliced the deck square in the middle. “Six of spades,” he whispered.

Ace smiled. “Angie?”

Farber twitched. Then, with a shrug, he leaned over and flipped his card. King of diamonds!

THE Ace’s voice was low, almost taunting. “Well, Leo, looks like you’re low man on the totem pole. Which is it? Are you game to take a chance, or are you blabbing?”

I watched the fat man. He seemed uncertain. He seemed to falter, feel for the gun. Then, he was picking up the pistol, and putting it to his temple. He pulled the trigger.

I jumped. Nothing had happened.

The Ace was relentless. “Your turn, Farber.”

I found myself looking at my watch again. A couple of minutes to ten. Which would come first—the cops or the bullet? The minutes, the seconds even, were dragging. . . .

I held my breath. Farber was sitting there, his eyes bulging out of their sockets, his face streaked with sweat. His lips were moving soundlessly.

I wondered if Farber was praying. I found myself wondering if I was gonna get the chance to pray next. Hell, why kid myself! I was praying now. I was praying Angie would get his before me. ...

“Take your time,” the Ace was saying. “There are six chambers in that gun, and only three guys. You might even get a second chance—if you’re lucky—”

I can’t tell you what happened after that. I don’t even remember how Farber got the rod in his hand. I just saw it there, just watched him point it at his own head, then squeeze the trigger—

I stood up and screamed. Farber was looking at me—and he wasn’t dead.

They were all staring at me now. Fat, greasy Leo’s lips were spread in a wide grin. Hawk-faced Angie was like a thin-beaked vulture waiting for me to die. As for me, I could do nothing but glance at my watch stupidly. It was after ten—and the gun was in my hand.

I stared at it. It seemed to gather weight in my hand until it felt like it weighed a ton. I began to wonder what chance I had to point it at Ace and blast away. I discarded the idea as soon as I thought it. It was no good. I couldn’t even be sure the damn rod would go off.

That was the hell of it! I couldn’t be sure it wouldn’t, either. And I couldn’t take a chance on a second round. I looked up, and into the face of the Ace.

I grimaced. The Ace! He was staring at me behind those big, black cheaters, a tight little smile puckering up the corners of his

mouth. He was cool and serene—just like the Ace I always knew. Suddenly I realized that I must have been wacky to think it had been otherwise. The Ace hadn’t changed. Only me.

There was still that knife I always had in my coat pocket. I weighed the chances of tossing it at him before he got me. With him looking at me straight in the face? Nah, not a chance.

My only out with his old “use your eyes and head” gag. Well, I did use my eyes—and saw his gun. So I used my head—to stay alive. No dramatics—what the hell difference did it make?

“I did it,” I heard myself say. “I killed your brother.”

WELL ... the bulls arrived after awhile. And all they found was just the Ace and me, sitting in that little room.

From the conversation between that flatfoot Rump or Rupp—whatever his name was—and the Ace, I realized that I made a few mistakes. Like that jitteryness I displayed when they had asked me to identify the Ace’s kid brother. And the two hundred dollar suit I had been sporting when I shouldn’t have had the price of a cup of Java. Not to mention my biggest boner—the knifing I so stupidly prattled about to Ace in his apartment. Yeah, that’s right. Only the real killer could have known that the Ace’s brother got his with a knife. I had forgotten that nobody ever told me.

Yeah, I had made plenty of slips—even to letting the Inspector get wise to who was doing the calling when I tipped him off about the game. I would call him “Rump” instead of Rupp.

And another thing. It didn’t make me feel any better to learn that all of my mistakes wouldn’t have meant a thing, if the Ace hadn’t staged his little game to get me to confess. Not a damn one of them would have stood up in court—so the Inspector said—

Hell, it was all water-under-the-bridge for me, and I was willing to let it go at that. I had taken a big gamble when I tried for the million-dollar gravy the Ace had left—and I had lost. First, Big Joe Heinz had gotten in my way; then the Ace's kid brother.

I guess about the only thing that bothered me was the Ace. In the old days, he

had always been a right guy with me. So when the Inspector and me was about to leave, I had tried to shake hands with him. He had never even looked at my hand.

Later I mentioned it to Rupp.

The Inspector looked at me, surprised, then he started to laugh. "God, you're dumb, Buggsy! Couldn't you see he is blind?"