Ten Detective Aces, September 1943

Roll Out the Coffin

By William Rough

He picked up a dart and aimed it at the man with a gun.

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The only thing that 4F bartender, Feetsy, could do well was to throw darts. And the Army figured a bombardier was better than any beer hall sharpshooter. But the time came when all that Uncle Sam could use to pin back Hitler's ears was Feetsy's feathered needles—and Feetsy was on the lam.

UP UNTIL the night barrel-bellied Mike Phelan got killed very dead in his riverfront barroom, Feetsy James was just another nobody bartender. Katie-Kathleen, Mike's dark Irish daughter, had maybe looked at Feetsy through a woman's eyes, but she didn't let on or stop dating Carl Sprang, the other bartender.

The boys from the refinery down the street found out the hard way that Feetsy was both a shark at shooting darts and a nut about the war. One brawlish payday night he took them for a cool three hundred dollars, shooting closest man to the bull's-eye. The next night he handed each loser a war bond and a plea not to throw money away when guys were fighting a war.

But aside from that, no one noticed Feetsy much, or figured him for the stuff that makes heroes. After one look, you just decided he'd been behind the door when the brawn and brains were passed out.

He was scrawny and runty and homely. He had toothpicks for arms, matchsticks for legs, a lollypop stick for a neck, and hair-colored bristles for hair. The only place Nature hadn't skimped on Feetsy was the department below his ankles, from which he got his nickname and an "irremedial defect" from the army.

Number Twelves are not so much an outsize on an average man, but on a person of Feetsy's build they are a bit emphatic. Moreover, you couldn't help spotting them, the way Feetsy picked them up and put them down. The reason for that was that at the age of nine Feetsy snitched some dried herring from a street pushcart and then tried to elude a cop by scrambling up on some boxes and jumping over a fence.

The technique was sound enough in Feetsy's slum neighborhood, only this fence happened to be ten feet high, and there were no boxes on the other side. Feetsy ended up in the charity ward of a hospital with the arches of both feet fractured.

The slap-slap way he had of walking, after that, made him sour on Donald Duck cartoons for life, and guaranteed that he'd never wear a khaki uniform, or trip the light fantastic with Katie-Kathleen. He might trip, and certainly he'd be fantastic on a dance floor; but there'd be nothing light about it.

Mike Phelan got killed at closing time one summer night. The barroom was empty, even the poker players had cleared out of the back room. Mike was counting the take and Feetsy was practising with the darts. He had to wait till Mike went upstairs before setting up his army cot behind the bar. The room rent thus saved went into war bonds.

When the man with the gun and the handkerchief over his face glided in, Feetsy had one dart in the bull's-eye and another poised to throw.

Feetsy saw the gun, mentally labeled it a stickup, then felt his stomach turn over. It wasn't a stickup. It was cold blood. Feetsy saw and heard three deliberate shots. He stopped breathing.

Mike Phelan's bulk drove against the back bar. He gurgled and then slumped forward, his massive stomach thrusting into the cash register. The bell rang.

Sheer horror puddled in Feetsy's eyes. He'd never seen it like this before. Mike Phelan was a good guy. He was—

FEETSY sobbed and threw a dart with all his might. It stabbed the man with the gun in the hip. The man squealed in pain and batted the dart away with the back of his hand. The gun swung on Feetsy.

Feetsy thought it was coming, but his insides were rumbling so much he didn't care. He lunged forward, wide open.

The man brought the gun barrel against Feetsy's ear. As he fell, Feetsy puzzled vaguely over why it hadn't been bullets for him too. He found out quickly. The man dropped the gun on the barroom floor and fled through the swinging doors. His feet made scampering sounds.

Feetsy clawed for the gun. He stood, swaying. The smell of burnt cordite was acrid through the beery barroom odor. Feetsy's fingers were tense wires on the cold smoothness of the gun. He shambled out into the street. A crouched, loping figure was a block away. Feetsy stuck out the gun, felt it kick back against the heel of his hand. The

sound seemed flat out in the night air.

Feetsy fired till only metallic clicks carne from the gun. His target rounded a corner, unscathed. Somewhere up the block, a policeman's whistle sounded. A nightstick drummed on the pavement.

Feetsy squeezed his eyes tightly. They smarted as if he'd gone through tear gas. He opened them again, stared at the gun in his hand. Then he understood many things. He knew why the man had not killed him too.

Feetsy dropped the gun as if it had come alive. It clanged on the pavement. He jumped away from it. It couldn't be. But it was. The gun. It was his.

Feetsy's thin chest worked like a bellows. Air made sucking sounds as it drove in and out of his nose and gaping mouth. The last time he'd seen this gun, it had been in his suitcase under the bar. It was a cheap mail-order, snub-nosed .38. Feetsy had won it in a crap game once.

A cop's whistle shrilled again. Feetsy's eyes bulged. A dozen witnesses around the barroom had seen him pull the gun out of the suitcase one night and bet it in a dart game. It now bore Feetsy's fresh fingerprints. A routine paraffin test would prove he'd fired it tonight.

Feetsy heard the solid clump of police brogans approaching. He didn't give any orders to his feet. They took care of themselves.

"Feetsy, stop!"

It wasn't Riley, the cop's voice. Feetsy didn't recognize it, though it had called him by name. He ran faster.

"I'll shoot, Feetsy!"

Feetsy knew he was clearly outlined against the subdued wartime lights of the refinery down the street, but he didn't stop. He strained toward the looming, sausage-like dirty silver tanks and the pipelike distillation columns. When he was almost to the barbed-wire-topped fence that enclosed the plant, he swerved.

A shot whined overhead. Feetsy's lungs fought the musty, fetid smell of dead oil. He headed for the river front. He'd be safe there. For a while. . . .

WHEN a red molten sun boiled over the horizon, already dripping heat on the ship ways, refineries, and assorted war plants lining the river banks, Feetsy pulled Mabel out of the oil-scummed water where he'd been easing her practically all night. Mabel was a pet bunion; Feetsy gave names to his corns.

He saw wallowing shapes that had been ghosts in the dark, turn into puffing tugs and freighters and weirdly camouflaged naval vessels. He wiggled his feet in the sun to dry them.

Feetsy pulled on socks and shoes very carefully so that there'd be no more than the usual irritation. He knew that at the first slip, those feet would have to travel faster and far.

During the night Feetsy had decided that Carl Sprang, who stayed out of the army by claiming his hardworking mother was dependent on him, had killed Mike Phelan. Feetsy told himself that even a rookie gendarme would see that Carl wanted Mike turfed over so he, Carl, could marry Katie-Kathleen and appropriate the business.

Of course, any of the regulars around the place could have snitched Feetsy's .38 from the suitcase under the bar and tilted Mike, but Feetsy didn't think anyone but Carl would sink so low—except maybe Shystie Booner.

Shystie Booner was a dumpy little poker huckster whom Feetsy and Mike Phelan had been keeping an eye on. The reason was that in poker contests with the boys from the plant, Shystie invariably lost, these days. It meant that Shystie was polishing the apple with the boys from the plant so that he could pump them about the amounts of butadiene, toluol, styrene, and other such chemicals they were making.

Feetsy had been all for giving Shystie the hip, but, Mike had said no, they'd wait and

watch till they got something definite on the little chiseler. Was it possible that Mike *had* got something, and Shystie had—

No, it couldn't have been Shystie, Feetsy knew. Shystie was short and pot-bellied. The man who shot Mike was tall and slender. It must be Carl Sprang.

"And if only I get the pants off him," Feetsy muttered, "I will prove it. I catch him with that dart right where he sits."

Feetsy shuffled warily through the colored section. He ducked into a subway and lost himself downtown. He expected to find his name in headlines, but a short paragraph, crowded on a back page, said merely that Michael Phelan, well-known restaurateur, had been killed in a holdup. There was no mention of Feetsy.

"They are giving me rope, hunh?" Feetsy pondered. "Well, I will not get the pants off of Carl this ayem, as he will stick close with the cops. I will be cagey awhile."

Feetsy unerringly hid out in the movies that morning. His taste ran to whodunits. He saw three of them, and in everyone the killer acted just like that smooth, butter-tongued Carl Sprang, while the heroine's image, sooner or later, turned into Katie-Kathleen's small, heart-shaped face.

FEETSY didn't even enjoy his hamburgers at lunch. The thought that Carl was holding Katie-Kathleen's hand and murmuring, "Who would've thought little Feetsy would do such a thing?" made him sick. He imagined tears puddling in Katie-Kathleen's blue eyes and her pink cheeks whitening against her wonderful dark hair. He couldn't stand it. All that mattered in the world was telling Katie-Kathleen Phelan that he hadn't root-a-tooted for her papa.

"Katie-Kathleen," Feetsy said, from what he considered the safety of a public phone booth, "this is Feetsy. But do not call me by that tag audible."

"Ooo, Feetsy!" Katie-Kathleen squealed.

"Do not call me Feetsy, Katie-Kathleen," Feetsy repeated. "Cops downstairs from your phone are no doubt listening. Katie-Kathleen, do you think I am the specimen who put the awning over your papa?"

"Ooo, Feetsy, I don't know what to think! I'm just crying."

"And listening to that Carl, hunh?"

"We-ell, he's being awful nice, Feetsy."

"He is a slimy," Feetsy said, "and do not call me Feetsy, Katie-Kathleen, I have nothing to do with what happens to Mike. I am like a picture on the wall, with the old frameroo draped on me. That is why I cannot give you my sympathy personal and proper. Do you believe me?"

"I—believe you, Feetsy."

"You do not sound much like you believe me, Katie-Kathleen," Feetsy sighed. "But I am honest in here pitching, and I will have the pants off the guy who does this. You'll see."

"Feetsie," Katie-Kathleen said, and Feetsy thought her voice was sweeter than ice tinkling in a dollar cocktail. "Feetsy, I must see you."

"No," Feetsy said. "You are no moll; you are a good girl with a deceased papa and a wake on your hands. Don't call me Feetsy, Katie-Kathleen. Why do you want to see me and where?"

"On the corner of Arch and Twelfth, Feetsy. Quick. I will tell you why when I see you."

A finger of doubt touched Feetsy's spine. "You will tell me now or you will not see me, Katie-Kathleen," he said.

There was no sound from the other end. Feetsy wondered if she was holding her palm over the mouthpiece. Then she said, the words rushing, "I recognized your gun, Feetsy, and hid it. I want to give it to you. I—I'm trying to believe you, Feetsy."

Feetsy swallowed. He thought that was wonderful. He said, "Katie-Kathleen, I think this is wonderful. Katie-Kathleen, I—I love you, Katie-Kathleen."

"Why, Feetsie! Ooo, Feetsy, maybe you better not—"

There was a click and she was gone. Feetsy thought they'd been cut off. Then he thought it was a little strange. Then he didn't know what to think.

There was no use trying to be reasonable, though. If Katie-Kathleen was hiding the gun, why, it was a wonderful thing. The corner of Arch and Twelfth was a magnet that drew Feetsy irresistibly.

AND THEN, all of a sudden, Feetsy was down on women for life. A gun in his back and a voice in his ear, as he stood at Arch and Twelfth, told him he'd been trapped.

"Feetsy, just walk quiet," said the voice. "Get in that taxicab."

Feetsy almost sniveled as he obeyed. Katie-Kathleen was the only person in the world who could have fingered him. He scrunched into a corner of the cab as the driver swung into traffic. The man beside him held a Colt .45 automatic very firmly. He had brown hair and eyes, and a jaw. Feetsy knew he was no punk.

"Tell me about Mike, Feetsy," the man invited.

Feetsy chewed his lips.

"Come, Feetsy, I could have shot you last night."

Feetsy's close-set watery eyes widened. "You are the guy who potted at me?"

"I am. But I shot over your head, understand?"

"And why did you not aim at street level?"

"Because you are a witness, Feetsy," said the man. "And it's my job to keep witnesses alive, not kill them."

Very suddenly Feetsy's feet stopped smarting. His thin shoulders relaxed, but not much. He knew a ride with a cop is maybe not so abrupt, but often just as sure, electricity being used instead of bullets.

"You are a cop, hunh?" Feetsy said. "Well, you can laugh, but I am wearing the old frameroo."

"I'm a believer, Feetsy."

Feetsy couldn't believe his ears. "Hey, you mean it?"

"Cross my heart." The detective showed white teeth in a grin.

"Well!" Feetsy said. "Well! Lissen, then: the character who trimmed Mike has a dart hole where he sits. I personally put it there last night."

The detective's lips tightened. "That would be a fair clue, Feetsy, if men wore shorts. But they don't. How would you suggest we find the right guy to take off his pants?"

"There is only one right guy," Feetsy said quickly. "Carl Sprang. Let me at him, copper."

The detective seemed to mull this over while the cab stopped for a red light. Suddenly his fingers let go the gun. It slid into Feetsy's lap. Feetsy picked it up and handed it back.

The detective grinned and said, "Feetsy, are you a loyal American?"

"The Board does not want feet all over bunions, and flat," Feetsy said, "but I would drive a tank to Berlin."

"H'm. Feetsy, I'm going to trust you. Take a look at this."

Feetsy looked at a badge which said Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity. "You are a G," he said. "One of Mr. Hoover's boys."

"Marty Niles is the name. You understand I'm trusting you, Feetsy."

Feetsy was not unimpressed, but he had to know something. "Did Katie-Kathleen—"

"Now, Feetsy, she did it for your own good," Marty Niles cut in. "She made me swear I was on your side first. She's cute."

Feetsy's heart glowed. Katie-Kathleen had not shown the perfidy of women, after all. He was ashamed of having doubted her. She had fingered him for his own good. It was wonderful.

Feetsy wiggled his toes blissfully for a moment, a short moment indeed. For Marty Niles whistled the following patter:

"Mike Phelan was killed, Feetsy, because he'd probably learned too much about certain characters who hang out in his place."

"Shyster Booner," Feetsy nodded.

"You spotted him?"

"Me and Mike," Feetsy said. "We was waiting to pin him down."

"You spot anybody else?"

"Who else?" said Feetsy.

"Blond Harry plays in those poker games, doesn't he?"

"G'wan! Him? Why he works right in the plant."

MARTY NILES said, "Wouldn't saboteurs need an inside guy? Blond Harry's the one who sneaked in the dynamite."

Feetsy goggled. "Dynamite?"

"We found a whole case buried out in the tank farm."

"Jeez!" Feetsy whistled. "Those tanks would blow up half the river."

"M'm," Marty Niles said dryly. "We substituted damp sand for what we found, but our main job is to catch the boss-man, Feetsy. Shystie Booner and Blond Harry are stooges. We've been hoping they'd lead us to the boss, but no soap. Maybe they'll bite on you."

"Me?" Feetsy squeaked.

"We want you to be a decoy, Feetsy."

"D-decoy?" Feetsy stuttered. "You mean make off like a duck?"

"Something like that. See, if you—"

"Now wait!" Feetsy cried. "All I wanna do is get the pants off Carl Sprang and show Katie-Kathleen I didn't knock off her papa."

"Oh," said Marty Niles. He made his voice disappointed. "I thought you wanted to do something for your country."

"Yeah, sure. I do, G. But also, I gotta—"

"Feetsy, you can't serve two masters," Marty Niles said severely.

"But if I throw in with you, will we prove Carl done the murder?" Feetsy gulped.

"Why should I kid you, Feetsy?" Marty Niles said. "I figure the guy who killed Mike is small fry. I'd even be willing to let him go if it meant catching the boss. And why? Because if you catch Mike's killer, you're only helping yourself. If you catch the bigshot, you're helping everybody; guys in the army and navy and defense plants—and everybody."

Feetsy was very quiet. It wasn't simple, after all. He had to figure the U. S. in it.

"Jeez, I didn't ask for this," he groaned.

Marty Niles touched him. "We didn't ask for the war either, Feetsy."

Feetsy made fists in his lap. He tightened his toes until Mabel fairly squalled. "Does it have to be me?" he pleaded. "Can't you get another guy?"

Marty Niles shook his head. "You're just right for what we have in mind, Feetsy. You've been framed, yet we told the city cops not to make any noise about you. The guys we're after will figure there's something fishy, yet they know you're not smart enough—I mean, if we use one of our own men, Feetsy, he'd be spotted right off."

Feetsy felt blood pounding in his bunions. His eyes smarted from being open so wide. He stuttered, "You mean it's d-dangerous, like that? You figure I'll get root-a-tooted at?"

Marty Niles bit his lip. "Oh, you know how these things are," he started. Then he scowled. "No, dammit, I won't kid you, Feetsy. We'll try to cover you, but you'll be sticking your neck away out. We *want* these Nazappies to spot you. There it is."

Marty Niles looked out at the street. He lit a cigarette. The cab stopped for a red light, then lurched on. Horns honked and a whistle blew. But inside the cab it was still.

Marty Niles flicked his cigarette out. "Forget it, Feetsy," he said. "Some other time, eh? I know how you feel, only I sure figured . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You figured what?" Feetsy said.

"Nothing. Forget it."

"Go on. Say it."

Marty Niles called to the cabby, "My friend wants to get out at the next corner." He leaned back again, not looking at Feetsy.

Feetsy gritted, "*Say* it!"

"Oh, it's nothing." Marty Niles studied his knuckles. "It's just that of all the guys we had the eye on down at Mike's, we figured you were the strongest for the U. S."

"Yeh?" Feetsy yelped. "For the U. S., hunh? Hunh? . . . You said it, G!" His breath went in and out. "You keep going," he yelled at the cabby. "Nobody ain't getting out of this cab. You hear me, G?"

Marty Niles squeezed Feetsy's arm.

FEETSY sat in the poker game in the smoke-swirled back room at Mike's place, that night. He was right next to Blond Harry, a blue-eyed, yellow-haired giant of a man. Shystie Bonner's puffy, mottled face was across the table; from time to time Carl Sprang thumped trays of beers on the green baize table.

It was the eyes that got Feetsy. The men had greeted him cordially enough, but it was their eyes. Shystie's were rheumy and shifting. Carl Sprang's were liquidly black as ripe olives floating in oil. Blond Harry's were the worst: blue, cold, opaque. Feetsy wished he were anywhere else in the world, but especially upstairs with Katie-Kathleen.

The little vial of Mickey Finn drops in Feetsy's pants pocket burned against his thigh. He was supposed to slip those drops into Blond Harry's beer around midnight.

"He generally leaves about that time," Marty Niles had told Feetsy. "When he hits the air, he'll realize he's been doped. See, you're only giving him a half dose. We don't want him knocked out, just groggy. Then he'll figure *you* did the doping and come back and take you to the bossman, maybe."

"*Maybe* is right!" Feetsy had wailed. "And maybe he'll just wait till I come out and cool me then!"

Marty Niles assured him that that would be very unfortunate indeed, as then they wouldn't nab the boss after all.

By eleven-thirty, Feetsy's bunions had covered twenty miles from here to there under the table. The last time Blond Harry had dealt, a very strange thing had happened. Blond Harry had slapped down the cards for Shystie Booner to cut, and Shystie had neatly switched decks. Feetsy couldn't make heads or tails out of that move, as the cards Blond Harry dealt weren't stacked. They couldn't have been, for neither Shystie nor Blond Harry won that hand. Why, then, the switch?

Blond Harry called for a nightcap. Feetsy grabbed the tray Carl Sprang brought in and handed out the beers, He fumbled the Mickey Finn drops into Blond Harry's glass, positive that everyone had seen him. Blond Harry left the drink untouched for ten years, it seemed like. Then he yawned, tossed it off, and left.

"In twenty minutes he will be back and invite me for a walk," Feetsy thought, swallowing. "He will measure me for storage in some alley. Carl will marry Katie-Kathleen. And they might not even send flowers to my wake."

Feetsy didn't even look at his cards after that. He automatically discarded and drew, but he wouldn't have seen a royal flush. All of a sudden he was whoozy. He shook his head. Again. Shystie Booner's face was hazy, except the eyes. The eyes were very hard.

Feetsy knew what had happened now. Blond Harry had got hep and switched the drinks. Feetsy had drunk his own Mickey Finn. He thought he was pushing away from the table and springing to his feet. He wasn't though. He was too weak. The dose that would have made Blond Harry merely groggy was too much for frail Feetsy. He went to sleep on the table.

WHEN Feetsy awoke, Mike's place was empty, save for a slouching form across the table. Feetsy shook some of it off and saw that Shystie Booner's eyes were still hard.

Moreover, Shystie held a gun. He spat when Feetsy struggled up.

"You're lucky," Shystie said. "I was just gonna slap you out of it. We got places to go unless you want to stick here permanent."

Feetsy gathered himself for a spring. Then he groaned, realizing he couldn't even fight for it. Maybe Marty Niles was waiting for just this. Maybe he was waiting outside to follow them.

And maybe he'd peeked in, seen Feetsy asleep, and given up.

The soft white flesh of Shystie Booner's gambler's hands oozed around the gun grip as he put the barrel in Feetsy's back and prodded him out the back door.

They went up the alley. They covered two blocks in dead silence. Then it happened. Behind them. A scuffle. A thud. "Okay, Shystie," called a voice.

"Back again," Shystie ordered. Feetsy retraced his steps. What he saw made him want to cry. Blond Harry had a hammerlock on Marty Niles.

"They pitched as a curve, Feetsy," Marty said thickly. "I wouldn't be surprised if this punk is the boss-man himself."

Blond Harry laughed without mirth. "You *wanted* to see the leader, didn't you? Did you really think this little moron could trap me?"

"Hey! He *is* the boss!" Feetsy cried. "Maybe that's why he slipped Shystie a different deck in the game."

Marty Niles groaned. "He slipped Shystie a deck? I get it. *He* was the guy who gave orders. He gave them to Shystie during the card games. What a—"

"Sap you are," snickered Shystie. "What do we do with them, Harry?"

Blond Harry manhandled Marty Niles into Mike's, out to the barroom. "Get his handcuffs," he commanded.

Shystie Booner's glittering eyes saw what to do. He prodded Feetsy to the end of the bar, near the dart board and a water pipe. He fastened one link of Marty Niles' handcuffs to Feetsy's left wrist, passed the other link behind the pipe and held it till Blond Harry forced Marty Niles' wrist into it.

"Now what, Harry?" Shystie chuckled.

"This!"

Blond Harry's fist clubbed Shystie from behind. Shystie slumped. Blond Harry produced a gun. "I won't need him any longer," he said and hit Shystie behind the ear, twice. He looked at Feetsy.

"No point in blubbering, little meddler," he said. "The patrolman'll be another fifteen minutes and Carl will stay upstairs with the girl till I call him." His lips twisted. "And I won't call him. I won't need him any longer, either."

Blond Harry took three strides into the back room. He returned with a wooden case, studied the barroom, and then put the case behind the bar. "Damp sand has not been substituted in *this* case," he said thinly. "Nor in the *other* cases I've buried in the tank farm." He took a fuse and a blasting cap from a pocket.

Feetsy heard Marty Niles suck in his breath. "So this, Mike's place, was the stop-over for the dynamite before you smuggled it into the plant?"

Blond Harry took a stick of dynamite from the ease and began digging a hole in it with a penknife. "It was quite a while before Mike suspected," he murmured. "Then, of course, he had to be silenced."

"You told Carl to snitch my Betsy and frame me," Feetsy burst.

BLOND HARRY put one end of his fuse into the blasting cap and crimped it with his white teeth. He wedged the blasting cap into the hole in the stick of dynamite and shoved it back into the case.

"You compliment Carl," he said. "His courage extended only so far as concealing the dynamite was concerned. True, he, what did you say, snitched the gun? But he couldn't be relied on to use it."

Feetsy started to curse. He was losing control. Blond Harry was calmly laying the fuse behind the bar. “Then you’re the huckster I wanna get the pants off,” Feetsy bleated. “You’re the guy I catch with the dart!”

Blond Harry looked up. His blue eyes flickered. “Thanks for reminding me of that,” he said. Swiftly he unraveled the end of the fuse. He lit a cigarette. Then he walked coolly over to Feetsy and his hand lashed Feetsy’s cheeks.

Feetsy clawed at him futilely. Marty Niles’ free hand tightened on Feetsy’s shoulder. “Don’t give him the satisfaction, Feetsy,” he growled.

Blond Harry’s teeth flashed again. “I’ll have my satisfaction when the crowd gathers here after the explosion. The excitement will give me a free hand to destroy the tank farm.”

Swiftly, he bent down and touched the glowing end of his cigarette to the fuse. The black powder sputtered and caught.

Feetsy’s control broke. “Katie-Kathleen!” he screamed. “Katie-Kathleen, get out!”

Marty Niles slapped Feetsy in the mouth. “Steady, kid.” He looked at Blond Harry. “It slows us up, but it doesn’t stop us, chum,” he said levelly. “We’ve got lots of cousins. Haven’t we, Feetsy? Somebody’ll pick it up where we put it down.”

Blond Harry bowed mockingly. “You are a brave man. That is a good fuse. It should burn about a foot a minute.” He closed the door.

“Sorry, Feetsy,” said Marty Niles. “You don’t have to stay quiet now.”

Feetsy’s eyes were fascinated by the fuse. He could see it, snaking along in the aisle between the bar and the back bar, but it was twenty feet away. It had been about three feet long, now it was two.

“Do something, G!” Feetsy croaked.

“Don’t look at it, Feetsy.”

Feetsy turned his head to the wall. His free hand made a fist that pounded monotonously into his thigh.

“Feetsy,” Marty Niles said softly. “Feetsy, are you crying?”

“Yes,” Feetsy said, simply, “I am crying. I am no G, and I am not ashamed to be crying. I could stand it to be shot at, but I ain’t never figured it like this.”

“I know, kid, I know,” Marty Niles said huskily. “I’m sorry I got you into it.”

“It ain’t your fault,” Feetsy said moistly. “It was for Katie-Kathleen. Oh, G! Now she is going to get it too!”

“It’s a hell of a thing to say, kid, but she won’t feel a thing.” Marty Niles grunted.

“And neither will that slimy Carl,” Feetsy rasped. “Damn him! Damn him!” Feetsy’s fist stopped pounding his thigh and pounded the wall instead. The dart board and the rack of darts were at his fingertips. In a frenzy, Feetsy grabbed a dart and flung it with all his might. Another.

“Feetsy!”

Marty Niles’ voice was uncanny. He seized Feetsy by the throat with his free hand, tried to shake him. And all the while, he was shouting, “Feetsy, the darts! Feetsy, can you hit the fuse?”

Up until then, Marty Niles had been an iceberg. Now he was trembling. The effect on Feetsy was demoralizing. Before he knew what he was doing, he lobbed a dart at the fuse. Missed by three feet.

“No, Feetsy!” yelled Marty Niles. “Don’t try to *split* it! Hit it where it goes in the box. It’s one in a million, but you might jar that percussion cap free.”

“I can’t!” Feetsy cried.

“Try! Damn you, you’ve got to try, Feetsy!” Marty Niles slapped Feetsy’s face again. “Now!” he yelled “I’ve got your mind off it! Throw ‘em, Feetsy!”

Feetsy threw. One dart. Two. Three. The fourth one struck the fuse near the place it wound into the box of dynamite. It scarcely budged.

“No,” groaned Marty Niles. “It can’t be done!”

FEETSY felt the room spinning. Everything danced in front of his eyes. The bar, the tables in the corner, the cans of beer that had been standing on the back bar for ornament since before the war. He saw a crazy hodge-podge of beer cans, potato chips, peanuts. He closed his eyes, shut out everything. Every pore oozed perspiration, but his mouth was velvet.

"Chin up, soldier." Marty Niles was cold again.

Feetsy opened his eyes, started to look sideways. His glance froze. The beer cans on the back bar had steadied down again. Feetsy was hypnotized.

"G!" he husked. "Them cans—them beer cans, G! They're right over the *fuse!"*

Marty Niles wrenched Feetsy's head around. "Look at me!" he commanded. "Slow, now. Anything's possible, Feetsy. You don't have a thing to lose. Okay?"

Feetsy's lips were ragged, but, "Okay," he said. "Gimme 'em."

Marty Niles got a handful of darts. He fed them to Feetsy, one at a time. And one at a time Feetsy threw them at the pyramid of beer cans on the back bar. Maybe he didn't realize what he was doing, but that was all to the good. His first darts didn't have enough moxie on them, but after that Feetsy got the range and he dragged all the strength in his thin body up into his throwing arm—and put it behind those darts.

There was dead silence except for the *ping* of the darts stinging the beer cans, the thud as they fell to the floor. But after every ping and thud, there was another pinpoint hole in the cans. And from the holes spurted liquid.

One hole, or two, or three wouldn't have done it. But the dart rack was full and Feetsy scored with a dozen. The beer dribbled down and puddled under the last foot of the fuse. When the spark reached the puddle, it sizzled out.

Marty Niles pounded Feetsy's shoulders. "You honey, Feetsy!" he yelled. Feetsy neither felt nor heard him. He'd passed out.

When he came to, he thought for a moment he was in heaven. His head was on something very soft, and when he looked up he saw an angel: Katie-Kathleen.

"Ooo, Feetsy," she crooned. She had his head in her lap. "You didn't shoot papa, after all, and I love you, too."

"I didn't?" Feetsy said dazedly.

"Why, no, Feetsy. That detective you were with said a blond man named Harry did it. And Carl helped him."

Feetsy struggled up.

"Where did the G go, Katie-Kathleen?" he asked.

"He and Riley, the cop, ran out. I don't know where, Feetsy. Riley broke our front window getting in, and I think your friend broke Carl's jaw. There he is, Feetsy. Look at him."

Feetsy looked around. His eyes popped. Carl Sprang was handcuffed to the water pipe. Feetsy jumped up.

Katie-Kathleen said, "Ooo!" as Feetsy jarred her. Feetsy looked into her wonderful blue eyes. He scooped her up, kissed her.

"There, that will do for the nonce, Katie-Kathleen," he said. "Now you go upstairs." He turned to Carl Sprang. "I am just going to have the pants off of this slimy to make sure. It is too bad you are a lady and cannot watch me. . . ."