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**ROBERT SILVERBERG**

# **BLOOD ON THE MINK**

The Money Was Counterfeit – But the Danger Was Real!



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*She was lying on her side, in a twisted position, and the blood was soaking right through the mink and forming a little puddle on the sidewalk. I knelt by her side. Her eyes were glazing fast, and her face drained of blood, looked ghostly. She looked up at me, her head lolling, and tried to say something.*

*“Vic....”*

*She sank back. I threw open her coat and saw that there wasn't much use calling an ambulance. One shot had been enough. He had used a .45, and the big slug had entered right between her shoulder blades, bored through her body at tremendous force, and had emerged smack between her love breasts, half an inch to the right of the sternum.*

*There was a hole in her blouse with the diameter of a half dollar, and that hole went right through her body, heart and all. She had stayed alive for thirty seconds after the shot on sheer willpower, nothing more.*

*The key, I thought.*

*As I half expected, she was clutching it in her hand. The fingers hadn't started to get stiff yet, of course, but her grip was tight. I pried the key loose and slipped it into my pocket, and not a moment too soon, either, because the next minute the place was full of cops...*

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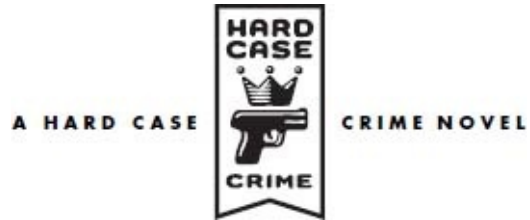
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# **BLOOD** *on* *the* **MINK**

*by* **Robert Silverberg**



**A HARD CASE CRIME BOOK**

(HCC-106)

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It was cold out at Chicago International Airport. A chill, nasty wind was rolling in off the lake. I puffed on a butt and watched the big DC-8 come taxiing in. The three Chicago detectives grew tense.

“There she is,” one of them murmured. “Flight 180, out of L.A. With Vic Lowney on board.”

“Not for long,” another chuckled.

I didn't say anything. It wasn't my place to make small talk. Leave that for the locals. I had a job to do, and the job began with my getting on that plane wearing Vic Lowney's name and Vic Lowney's identity. I only hoped the three locals didn't mess things up getting Lowney off the plane. One fumbled one bit of gunplay, and the whole job would be bollixed.

The DC-8 was slowing to a halt now. The ground crew went bustling out. They shoved the ramp up under the plane's door, and a moment later the passengers started getting off. A stewardess was reminding everybody, “Back in your seats in twenty minutes, please. This is only a brief stopover.”

Two by two they came out. Los Angeles to Philly, via Chicago. I clicked off each face as it appeared. The twelfth man out of the plane was our man.

Lowney had a Los Angeles look about him. He was tall and broad and heavily tanned, and he stepped off the plane with a kind of a swagger. His thick black hair was shiny with pomade. He wore a bright yellow shirt, a string tie, pegged pants, suede shoes, and—though it was a gloomy afternoon in Chi—dark sunglasses.

If he could have seen me, lounging against the wall just inside the departure shed, he would have had a shock. The faces weren't the same, but everything else was. String tie, yellow shirt, sunglasses, and all. I even had my cigarette drooping at the same angle. The tan had taken me four days under the U-V lamp.

I'm sort of a chameleon that way. It's what I get paid for. Right now I was busy convincing myself that *I* was Vic Lowney, number three man of the Southern Cal crime syndicate. Inside of five minutes, I was going to have to convince the rest of the world that I was Lowney, too. And my life depended on making it come off.

The three Chi detectives flashed their badges at the airline man and moved out onto the field just as Lowney came sauntering across. He had long legs, and he wanted to stretch them a little before resuming his flight to Philadelphia. The Chi boys might have been ad men right off Wacker Avenue with their flannels and their attaché cases. Lowney didn't suspect a thing right up until the moment they quietly surrounded him.

The whole thing took maybe fifteen seconds. They whispered to Lowney and one of them showed identification. I saw Lowney's face go icy. His lips moved in brief and probably impolite phrases. The Chi men murmured back, and one of them gently took hold of Lowney's elbow. He jerked free, and I thought there was going to be action, but the detective took the elbow again. They escorted him off the

field, taking the next door down. I didn't budge. I stubbed out my cigarette and lit another.

Ten minutes went by, and then one of the detectives reappeared, smiling like a little boy with a report card full of A's. He wanted me to stick a gold star on his cheek, I guess. He said, "He's in custody."

"So?"

"Everything went smooth, no?"

"The plane's going to leave soon," I said. I'm not paid to hand out compliments to the local police. "You got anything for me?"

"Sure. Sure, right here."

He slipped me a little blue folder. Lowney's plane tickets and baggage checks. "When you get settled in Philly, go through his bags. Anything you don't need, turn over to the police. They'll ship it back here."

I scowled at him. I could figure out that much of the deal for myself. Slipping the folder into my pocket, I nodded quickly and slouched back against the wall. I didn't want to talk to him anymore.

From here on in, I was Vic Lowney.

I waited five minutes, and just before the other passengers started coming back on board I got in line with the people getting on in Chi, and passed through. I sauntered aboard the way Vic Lowney would. The stewardess gave me a pretty smile and welcomed me on board. I reminded her that I was a through passenger from L.A. That shook her up a little. The nose and the lips were all wrong, but the glasses hid the eyes, and the clothes were pretty much the same. I went to my seat. Lowney had reserved one in advance, and the stub was attached to his ticket.

The plane filled up fast. One by one, the engines started up. We moved out onto the runway.

Lowney had left an Angeleno newspaper on his seat. I picked it up and started reading about the Dodgers. A minute later, we were in the air.

I kept the paper open in front of me, but I wasn't really interested in the doings of Sherry and Snider and Gilliam. I was going over and over Vic Lowney's dossier in my mind, letting it seep into my brain until it became my own biography.

*Your name is Victor Emanuel Lowney. Born 12 October 1927, Encino, California. Mother an Italian nightclub singer, Maria Buonsignore, died 1944, age 40. Father a movie bit player, Ernest Lowney, died 1932, drowning, age 30. You grew up in Pasadena, went to high school there, left in 1944 after three years. 1944-48, small-time crime. Car thefts, smuggling out of Tijuana, mostly girls. Met Charley Hammell October 1948. Originally hired as muscle, but quickly rose in the Hammell organization. For the last six years you've been his left-hand man. You have no police record, so he sends you all over the country as his personal representative. Like this trip to Philly.*

*You're a bachelor, and you've got a big house in Pacific Palisades. You hate filter-tip cigarettes and drink vodka martinis above anything else, and you've got a good eye for women. You eat steak for*

*breakfast. You're hot-tempered but shrewd. You've made half a dozen kills, but nothing proven. You were rejected by the army in 1950 on account of heart palpitations, thanks to the special injection Charley Hammell's doctor gave you before your physical. In general, Vic Lowney, you're a cold-blooded louse.*

I was used to being a louse. In my line of work you don't get to impersonate nice people.

You get word in Omaha or Fond du Lac or Jersey City that they need you, and next thing you know you're busy studying somebody and becoming him. Or maybe creating somebody out of whole cloth. It isn't pretty work, posing as a criminal. You swim through an ocean of filth before your job is done, and a lot of that filth gets swallowed.

But the job *has* to be done. *Somebody* has to do it.

I guess I'm the lucky one.

This time it was counterfeiting. For the past five or six months there had been a deluge of very classy queer stuff on the East Coast. Nothing but fives and tens, of course—it doesn't pay to make queer singles, while big bills attract too much attention. These fives and tens were pretty special. The engraving was downright flawless, and only the paper didn't quite measure up to Uncle Sam's own standard.

It was a close enough match, though, to fool anybody but an expert. Uncle Sam has a hard enough time keeping the budget balanced without competition from free enterprise. So the treasury men started tightening a net. It took three months to center the operation on Philadelphia. It took another two months to pick up the clue that Mr. Big of the queer-pushers was one Henry Klaus of Philadelphia—a man well known by the Philly authorities but thus far able to stay on the outside of a cell.

Picking up Klaus wouldn't help much. The way to smash the ring was to nab the engraver, who was obviously a man of great talent. Only Klaus kept him well hidden, evidently. Nobody had a lead.

At this point I got alerted to move into the case. The reasoning was that only an inside operation could get hold of that engraver. I was still trying to dream up a point of entry when we picked up word that Vic Lowney of L.A. was on his way East for a powwow with Klaus. The police had their own system of underworld intelligence—otherwise they'd never do better than parking tickets. They got the word. Lowney was being sent by Charley Hammell to line up a West Coast outlet for the queer stuff.

We got the wheels in motion. A West Coast man briefed me on Lowney. I roasted under a sunlamp to give myself an Angeleno tan. We plucked Lowney off his plane midway to Philly.

And here I was, twenty thousand feet in the air, wearing padded shoulders and a brand-new suntan and the identity of a louse.

It was getting close to five, Philadelphia time, when the plane started to dip low over the City

Brotherly Love. I fastened my seatbelt and waited for the landing.

It was October, and winter was closing in fast on Pennsylvania. The sky had a dull gray look, and the temperature was in the low fifties.

I strolled off the plane and into the terminal. This was the rough point, right at the beginning. The dossier said Lowney had never been to Philadelphia and knew none of Klaus' men personally. So far as we knew, no photo had been sent. The letter we intercepted mentioned only that Lowney could be recognized by the yellow shirt, string tie, and sunglasses. But if a photo *had* been sent—

I stood near the baggage counter and lit up. Two or three minutes went by. Then I saw two guys edging up. One was six-three high, and about the same wide. The other was small and ratty-looking. They both wore heavy slouchy-looking winter clothing. I ignored them.

The big one rumbled, "Uh—Lowney?"

I looked them over. "*Mister* Lowney," I said coldly.

"Yeah. We're from Klaus."

"*Mister* Lowney."

They looked at each other. I stared right through them. The ratty one said, "Klaus sent us, *Mister* Lowney. We've got a car waiting outside."

I made no comment on that. "Where's the john in this place?" I asked.

"There's one right around that bend," the big one said.

"Are you going to call me *Mister* Lowney or do I have to report that you boys are a bunch of crude yeggs?"

The big lad glowered at me. "The washroom is right back there, *Mister* Lowney."

"Thanks," I said. I pulled my baggage claim check loose and, handed it to the ratty one. "Here I'm going to go comb my hair. Pick up my luggage. Two Samsonite cases."

"Yes, Mr. Lowney." I could see him gagging over every syllable.

I ducked into the washroom, gave my pompadour some fresh curlicues, and leaned against the wall and looked at my watch for five minutes. Then I walked slowly out. The reception committee was waiting by the baggage counter, and the little one had his foot up on one of my suitcases. When he saw me, he got his foot off. In a hurry.

"We got your bags, Mr. Lowney."

"Okay. You want a medal?"

"Follow us, Mr. Lowney."

I let them carry my suitcases. By now they had caught the idea that I wasn't going to get chummy with underlings. We marched out through the terminal to the parking lot, and up to an Imperial sedan half a block long. Why gang boys go for these big black limousines I'll never understand. They might just as well put up a neon sign that says *Gangster*.

The little man opened the back door and I got in. Pint-size tried to get in next to me, but I shook

him away with my foot.

---

“You sit in front, man.”

The beady eyes were marbles of hate. “Now listen here, tough guy—”

“I said you sit in front. Want to debate it with me?”

His face unstiffened. He walked around to the front seat and got in next to the big one. I had taken the first round on points, by plenty.

“I’m staying at the Penn Plaza,” I said.

“We’re supposed to take you to Klaus.”

“You take me to the Penn Plaza. You think I flew three thousand miles to run right into a business conference? Wise up, simps. I need some relaxing first.”

“Klaus is gonna be awful mad—”

“I’ll see him when I feel like seeing him.”

The big boy turned around and said in a feathery voice, “Hey, *Mister* Lowney, you talk like you did us a big favor by coming here. You oughta realize that *we’re* the guys who gonna do *you* the favor.”

I gave him one cold look that wiped the smugness off his face.

“Can it, friend,” I said quietly. “Are you going to take me to the Penn Plaza, or do I take a cab?”

The Penn Plaza was a brand new hotel, maybe a year old, on Market a couple of blocks from City Hall. It was all shiny glass and steel, and single rooms began at eighteen bucks a night, and in general it was the sort of place that a Los Angeles man might be expected to stay at.

I let Klaus' two thugs drag my suitcases out of the sedan's trunk and turn them over to a bellhop. Then I said to them, "You tell Klaus he can get in touch with me here. He can try calling any time except between two and ten in the morning. Tell him I'm not available for business meetings until tomorrow."

The muscle looked rueful. "Klaus, he was looking forward to a meet with you tonight," the little one said.

"I'll see him tomorrow."

I walked into the hotel.

There were no snags about the reservations Lowney had made. They gave me a nice enough room on the tenth floor. I freshened up and was getting dressed for dinner when the phone rang. I picked up.

"Mr. Lowney?"

"That's right."

"This is Don Minton. I'm Mr. Klaus' assistant."

"What is it, Minton?"

"The chauffeur tells us you're not available for a meet tonight. Mr. Klaus is a little disappointed."

"Let me talk to him."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lowney. Mr. Klaus is unavailable at the moment. But he asks me to convey to you his regret that no meeting is feasible this evening. He wonders if you'll reconsider. He had made dinner reservations, you see, and he's looking forward—"

"Tell Mr. Klaus," I said cuttingly, "that Mr. Lowney is busy this evening. You got that?"

"Yes, Mr. Lowney." Everything very polite and deferential, but I could feel the anger underneath. "I'll tell him that. And when do you think a meeting might be arranged, Mr. Lowney?"

"Say, tomorrow. Tomorrow at six."

"Very good, Mr. Lowney. I'll pick you up at six sharp."

"Don't rush," I said. "I'm a slow dresser."

Minton gave me a frosty little heh-heh-heh and hung up. I got out of the yellow shirt and sweater and put on something out of Lowney's wardrobe. We were practically the same size, which made things very convenient. I took a leisurely glance through his suitcases, but there was nothing there but clothes and stuff, and some spare rounds for the gun he was carrying.

Around seven, I went down for dinner. The hotel had three or four restaurants, but I picked the most expensive. Hell, it wasn't *my* money. And it was in keeping with Lowney's character, anyway.

Lowney had a weakness for steak. A relief, that was—if the dossier had mentioned that he ate nothing but lobster, I'd have had to eat lobster, and I hate lobster. But I didn't mind loading up on steak as part of the act. I put away a pound or so of rare sirloin, prefacing the meal with a couple vodka martinis and accompanying it with a nice little bottle of wine. California wine, of course. Lowney had a liking for the good life, but he was a patriot at heart. No Châteauneuf-du-Pape for *him*, just good honest Napa red wine.

As I left the restaurant, some quail fluttered down toward me. Everything about her shrieked that she was a fancy pro. Gold lamé dress that ended well below the armpits and showed lots of soft rounded pale flesh. Unlikely blonde hair. Full red lips, only slightly too hard. Calculating greenish eyes. "Mr. Lowney?"

"That's my name, honey. What can I do for you?"

"You've got it wrong, Mr. Lowney. Maybe *I* can do something for *you*," she murmured huskily.

Now, the Penn Plaza is a reputable place, and I was sure it didn't supply floozies for the clientele. I gave her a puzzled look and she explained, "Mr. K. sent me over. He thought you might be lonely, this being a strange town and all."

"How thoughtful of him."

"We could go to dance for a while," she said hopefully. "Or maybe a show. And then—"

Either in or out of character, I couldn't see very much about this girl that I didn't find easy to look at. But the deal she was offering didn't fit in with my plans. Klaus was apparently interested in keeping tabs on me while I was in Philly. If he couldn't see me himself this first night, he was sending some choice flesh over to make sure I didn't get out of sight.

I shook my head, and, believe me, it hurt to do it. "Sorry," I said.

"What do you mean, *sorry*?"

"I appreciate the offer. But it so happens I've got a business appointment tonight. You can tell that to Mr. K."

She looked stunned. I guess she wasn't used to having an offer of free merchandise turned down. "What about afterward?" she purred.

"Afterward, I sleep," I said. "I need my rest, baby. You go thank Mr. K. for his consideration. Also tell him I'm engaged elsewhere tonight." I took a tenspot from my wallet and handed it to her. "Here. This is for your taxi fare home. Maybe we'll make it some other time, huh?"

"Yeah. Sure, Mr. Lowney. Whenever you like." She glided away. I shook my head regretfully. But business came before pleasure, and I wanted to keep Klaus worried. I didn't want him to get the idea he had any monopoly on my negotiating time while I was in Philadelphia. So I blotted all thoughts of those appealing snowy hillocks out of my mind, and went downstairs to the lobby.

Philadelphia is not exactly the most interesting town in the world, but it could be worse. I sauntered out for a little stroll around town. I walked down to Broad, looked in store windows for a while, and then—after making sure I wasn't being tailed—got into a cab.

“Just drive,” I told the cabbie. “Take me on a nice big zigzag, and when the meter reads three bucks let me off wherever I happen to be.”

He dropped me finally in a shabby suburb about three miles north of City Hall. I walked to the corner, turned it, and found a movie theater. I went in, sat down, watched a western for an hour, and left. I took a cab back to the Penn Plaza.

Let Klaus think I had had a rendezvous with some other local gangland figure. Let him sweat a little.

I got back to my room at quarter after eleven. I changed into one of Lowney's ornate silk dressing-gowns, ordered a vodkatini as a nightcap from room service, and sacked out by midnight. It hadn't been a very eventful day. I had switched places with Lowney. I had come to Philadelphia, and I had impressed on Klaus and his bunch that I was not a man to be trifled with. And I had blocked a pass thrown by a lovely blonde. Regrettable, but unavoidable. The next time Klaus waved a woman in front of my nose, though... .

Morning. I phoned for my breakfast: small cut of tenderloin, rare, french fries, glass of milk. A weird way to begin the day, but that was Lowney's way. Luckily, I had the stomach for it.

I lounged around the hotel all day. At six on the button, the room phone rang. It was Minton. Was I ready to come down for supper? I told him to wait ten minutes. I kept him waiting twenty.

He was pacing around in the lobby, a dapper, Ivy League type around thirty, short and crew-cut, clipped and impatient. The beady-eyed one who had met me at the airport was with him. Minton bustled out and gave me the big handshake. Beady-eyes said nothing.

“The car's outside,” Minton said.

It was the same black limousine, with the same big goon behind the wheel. I had expected to find Klaus in it, but he wasn't. Minton and I got in the back.

“Is Klaus meeting us at the restaurant?” I asked.

Minton smiled. “He'll be with us later.”

“Can't he demean himself to eat with me?”

“Something urgent came up this afternoon.”

I got the pitch. I had been grinding salt in the Klaus bunch's eyes, and Klaus was trying to give some of my own stuff back to me. Well, I couldn't blame him. He had scored a point in the little fencing match.

I wasn't keen on eating with underlings, but I couldn't back out of it now. So I simply didn't talk. I concentrated on eating, and answered Minton's polite phrases with curt nods. He gave up, after a while. We ran up a seventy-buck check for the four of us, and I let Minton pick it up without even



offering. He had to take care of the tip, too. By the time we got back into the car, he looked like the nice fancy meal was curdling in his intestines. But a man like Lowney didn't pal it with Minton's had to make that clear.

"We going to Klaus now?" I asked.

"Yes," Minton said, as though the single syllable cost him a month's pay.

The limousine pulled up in front of the Hotel Burke on 16th Street, and we had a nice thirty-story ride up to the penthouse suite. Klaus did things in style, as he could well afford with presses running night and day turning out the queer.

He was surrounded by a dozen of his men, only a couple of them goons and the rest college type. Klaus himself was a man of about fifty, short and stockily built, with lank gray hair combed straight across and drooping over his right ear. His nose was a straggly beak; his eyes were blue-gray, and chilly. We shook hands, and he gave me a piercing glance.

"So very good to see you, Mr. Lowney. We've heard so much about you on the East Coast."

"M-G-M wants to film the story of my life," I said. "We're dickering on the price."

Klaus chuckled. "Very funny, Mr. Lowney I'm sure it will make a fascinating movie. You must send me tickets to the premiere."

"I'll do that," I promised. "I'll be honored to have you come. With or without your retinue."

"Does it seem crowded here, Mr. Lowney?"

"Just a mite."

"Perhaps we can go into the next room—"

We went into an inner office. Minton trailed along like the good lackey he was. Klaus suggested drinks, and I sent Minton scurrying off to mix vodka martinis.

For the next half hour we sat around like old buddies, swapping the latest news of our respective domains. He fed me East Coast gossip and I let him in on various West Coast matters that Lowney could be expected to be privy to. Then we talked about the stock market for a while. Klaus was heavily invested in electronics companies, and he was wondering what to do. I told him to take his profits and get into oil. Real chummy stuff.

When I got tired of the routine I said quite casually, "I'd like to see a sample of your product, Mr. Klaus."

"Oh, let's not get down to business so soon, Mr. Lowney. Have another cocktail."

"I'd rather not," and suddenly there was steel in my voice. "Let's see the bills."

A shadow of a frown crossed Klaus' well-groomed face. Turning easily to Minton, he said, "Get a couple of packages, Don. One of fives, one of tens."

Minton went into an adjoining room and came back with two little stacks of bills, one hundred each kind, bound around their middles with blue paper. He tossed them down on the desk in front

me.

I picked up the tens and riffled through them without breaking the band. They were new and crisp, and they had the feel of money. The smell, too. They weren't limp and floppy like some phony stuff. They had the feel of engravings, not cheap litho stuff. The serial numbers were clear and sharp and ran in sequence.

Breaking the band, I took a tenspot off the top and held it gingerly between my fingertips. It was good.

It was *darned* good.

It was a Federal Reserve Note on the Philadelphia bank. The green seal on the right was perfect as was the Federal Reserve emblem on the left. In between was the portrait of Hamilton, and that was flawless too. There were no breaks in the cross-hatching behind the head, nor any awkwardness about the shading of the face. The lathework around the margins of the bill was all it had to be. On the front side, the picture of the Treasury Building had been copied by the hand of a master. For an uneasy moment I wondered if Klaus might be pulling a con by showing me a pack of real bills.

I looked over the fives. They were lovely. Whoever had engraved this queer stuff had as much skill as anybody working for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

Klaus and Minton were waiting for my verdict. I took a long, slow look at both sets of bills. If they had rung in real Government stuff on me, I was going to make one hell of a fool out of myself.

It was a chance I had to take.

Klaus couldn't stand it any longer. He broke the sticky silence.

"Well, Mr. Lowney? What is your opinion of our handiwork?"

I moistened my lips. Tapping the stack of tens, I said, "Not bad at all, Klaus. Not bad at all. Of course, they're a long way from being perfect. You've got to admit that yourself. I don't know if I can make a deal for a product of this grade."

It was as though I'd smacked him across the bridge of the nose with a billy-club. His face went pale and his eyes blazed with surprise and anger.

The reaction told me they hadn't rung in real stuff as a gimmick. If they had, they'd have been laughing themselves silly. Instead, they were boiling mad.

Klaus' mouth became a tight little line. Minton burst out, "Look here, Lowney, you've been trying to cut us down since you got off that plane. You know goddamn well this is the best queer thing that can be made."

"I say it's bush league stuff. You might as well be turning it out on a mimeograph."

Klaus was doing a slow simmer. But Minton was really sore. Maybe he was supposed to be demonstrative for the two of them. Anyway, he got halfway out of his seat, his lips working. I gave him a little twist of the blade.

"If I had known the stuff was crud like this, I could have sent my chauffeur east to look at it."

"Why, you arrogant punk, you ought to—" Minton began, getting the rest of the way out of his seat. He started to take a poke at me. I slipped a left past his guard and splattered his lips. Klaus didn't budge. Minton staggered back a little, his Ivy League phiz a bit battered now, and his hand went into his breast pocket.

I kicked my chair back and came at him. I hit him in the belly just as the gun appeared; all the life went out of him, and I caught the gun hand, twisted, nodded as the .38 fell to the thick carpet.

Minton looked ready to explode. He tried to get loose and took a feeble poke at me. I ducked and smashed him hard, right under his lower lip.

He sat down on the carpet. His eyes looked glassy, and there were droplets of blood on his nice white shirt. I picked up the .38, put it on the table next to the phony dough, and sat down again. Klaus hadn't even worked up a sweat.

"Your man is kind of impetuous, Klaus."

"He's a fool. Get up, Minton!" Klaus snapped. Minton hauled himself uncertainly to his feet. "Now get out of here and clean yourself up!"

Minton slithered out. I wondered if he had put on the act on a signal from Klaus. The product had been defended, in an incompetent sort of way. Now negotiations could proceed. I had the feeling that Klaus was unhappy about the way things were going.

He said in an oily voice, "I apologize for the unpleasantness of my colleague, Mr. Lowney. You see, we all take a rather staunch pride in our product. What exactly is your objection to it? Surely the engraving can stand any scrutiny whatever, and—"

"The engraving's fine," I said. "It's the paper."

"The best available."

“Not good enough. I believe in being frank, Klaus. I’m disappointed in the product. I’m going to call Hammell and tell him so.”

“Don’t be hasty. Maybe we can discuss improvements.”

“Let me call Hammell first. Mind if I use your phone?”

It was a transcontinental call, but he didn’t bat an eye. He shoved the phone across the desk to me. I picked it up and gave the long distance operator an Exeter number in L.A. It wasn’t Hammell who was calling, of course. It was a prearranged pickup in L.A. It was my way of letting HQ know that I had arrived safely and made rendezvous with Klaus.

Someone answered and I said, “Give me Hammell.” That was part of the signal. Asking for Hammell meant, *Not alone, possibly someone on an extension, so play along.* Asking for “Charley” would have meant relative safety.

A gruff voice said, “Hammell here. What’s the scoop, Vic?”

“I’m at Klaus’ and I’ve seen the queer. I’m not bowled over.”

“How so?”

“The paper tips it off. The stuff could be a lot better, that’s for sure.”

“You want to call the deal off?”

“Not unless you do. Maybe I can goose them a little. The product isn’t hopeless.”

“Yeah, you do that. Keep in touch, man.”

“Will do, Charley.”

I hung up. HQ knew I was in business, now. I turned back to Klaus and said, “He wants me to negotiate.”

“We aren’t hopeless, eh?”

“Not quite.” I took a crisp new real tenspot out of my wallet and laid it alongside one of the phonies. The bills looked like twins. Only an expert could detect with his naked eye the minute difference in paper qualities. Privately I was impressed. But I didn’t let my impression show. “You’re turning out some fair stuff, Klaus. But you’ll have to pick up the grade a little. Select your paper more carefully. I want an exact match.”

“We aren’t the Government, Mr. Lowney.”

“You’ve got to be damn close.” I rose, casually peeling ten tens and ten fives off the stacks of the queer. “I’ll take these for reference. Suppose you get in touch with me in a couple of days and let me see your latest products. The T-men are sharp out in our country, Klaus.”

“You don’t want to talk terms now?”

“Not till I’ve seen the product I can buy.”

“You’re a very difficult man, Mr. Lowney.”

“I’m paid to be difficult, Klaus. Will you show me out?”

On the way out I noticed a girl. She obviously belonged to Klaus, and had been elsewhere in the

suite when I arrived. She was an auburn-haired five-eighter, which made her a shade or two taller than Klaus. I pegged her for twenty-eight. She wore a lemon-colored gown and filled it out more than adequately. The word that summed her up was *lush*.

She gave me a sizzling look and murmured to Klaus, "Is this your California friend, honeybear?"

"Yes." Klaus wasn't in a conversational mood.

"Why don't you *introduce* us, loverbug?" she purred.

Klaus looked displeased. "Vic Lowney, Miss Carol Champlain." End of introduction. He said curtly to me, "I'll be in touch with you in a couple of days, Mr. Lowney. Or you can get in touch with me here at the Burke."

"Ye-ah," Champlain drawled. "*Do* keep in touch."

I gave her a nice smile, flashed a businessman's grin at Klaus, and headed for the elevator. As I closed the door I caught a glimpse of a puffy-faced Minton glaring at me. I guess he was about to get a dressing-down from Klaus for bungling things and pulling the gun.

I stepped out into a misty, cold autumn night and hailed a cab. Klaus hadn't even offered to have me driven home. I suppose he was a little sore.

And he had every right to be, because his product was fabulous. Only it wasn't good tactics to sell so. Not right away.

I figured he wouldn't sleep so well tonight. Not even with that bosomy redhead to keep him warm.

Back in my room at the Penn Plaza, I took out Klaus' bills and looked them over. They were really extra special. The paper, despite my quibbling, was a close enough match to fool nine out of ten bank tellers and ninety-eight out of a hundred storekeepers.

But the engraving was the real feature. You have to make engraved plates if you want to get away with faking U.S. currency. Any sort of photo-offset job will be immediately apparent to anyone but a novice. The trouble is that banknote engraving is an art and a science both. There aren't many capable engravers in this country, and those there are are well known and well watched. The Secret Service took care of the possibility that Government engravers might want to peddle a few plates on the side.

Whoever Klaus was using, the fellow was good. In capital letters. So long as Klaus had the plates—or the man who made them—he could easily dump ten million dollars' worth of bad bills a year. Or ten billion. It was all a mere matter of distribution and dispersion.

I put the bills away carefully—I didn't want to spend them by accident—and started to get ready for bed. It had been a fruitful night, I felt. Contact had been made, and I had established an image of Lowney in Klaus' eyes that probably came close to reality. Lowney's reputation was not one of genteel politeness. He was a tough son of a bitch, and he wouldn't jump into any quick deals. Klaus wasn't really expecting him to.

I was pondering the desirability of a midnight martini when the phone rang. “Hello?”

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“Mr. Lowney?”

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

“You wouldn’t know me. My name’s Litwhiler and I’m from New York. I’ve been trying to reach you all night.”

“I’ve been out. What’s the scoop?”

“I’ve got a business deal to discuss, Mr. Lowney. I’m right down here in the Penn Plaza cocktail lounge. Maybe you could come down and have a drink on me?”

“It’s late. What about tomorrow?”

“I’d rather make it tonight, Mr. Lowney. Philadelphia isn’t the safest town in the world for me.”

I raised an eyebrow thoughtfully. “Okay, I’ll be down in five minutes. How will I know you?”

“I’m in the far left-hand corner, sitting next to the fountain. I’ve got a charcoal gray suit on. Just walk in and look around, and I’ll spot you.”

I didn’t know any Litwhilers, except one who used to play baseball a while ago, but I was always willing to meet somebody new. Especially somebody who had a business deal to discuss with Vic Lowney.

He stood up and waved to me the moment I entered the dim cocktail lounge—which meant I didn’t know Lowney personally, but was only guessing that the big guy in western-looking clothes was his man. Litwhiler himself was of the new school of hoods, like Minton—the well-groomed kind in the sedate Brooks Brothers suit. He was a little old for the Ivy League, maybe forty, but he had a slick, sharp-edged New York look about him.

We shook hands and he said, “What are you drinking?”

“Vodkatinis.” I was getting sick of them.

He ordered a couple. Then he said in a low, you-and-me kind of voice, “Let’s put our cards on the table right at the outset, Mr. Lowney. We can do each other a whole lot of good.”

“You don’t get through to me, man.”

“Give me time. I know why you’re in Philly.”

“Really?”

He nodded smugly. “You’re here to arrange West Coast distribution of a product manufactured here.”

“You must have very big ears, Mr. Litwhiler.”

“I’ve got a very good intelligence system. When Vic Lowney flies to Philly, I find out why. I won’t even ask you to confirm what I just said. I *know*.”

“Keep talking,” I said noncommittally.

He fished the lemon peel out of his drink, deposited it in the ashtray, and went on, “I happen to represent a firm that’s in substantially the same line as the firm you’re here to deal with—the, sha-

we say, K firm. Here's an example of our merchandise."

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I took a deep sip of the cocktail before I deigned to look at the ten-dollar bill he put on the formica tabletop. It was pretty crude stuff. The paper was okay, as good as Klaus', but the ink had a gloss to that didn't really belong, and the engraving couldn't begin to match the job on the bills I had upstairs. I looked at it for a long moment. Then I said simply, "It stinks."

"Exactly, Mr. Lowney," Litwhiler said, smiling.

"Then why bother me about it?"

"Can I trouble you for your criticisms?"

"The ink's off shade, for one. And the engraving is punk. Maybe you could fool a couple of guys with this, but not me. Not me, Litwhiler, or my boss."

"We don't plan to. The ink problem is correctible. But we don't intend to use these plates any longer than we have to."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning," he said, "that we'd like to obtain the services of the engraver for the K firm and use him ourselves. And then we'd do a comparable job."

I drummed the table impatiently. "Get to the point, Litwhiler. You're boring me."

He didn't react. "The point is this: you can get buddy-buddy with Klaus. You can find out where his engraver is. Then you can lead us to him. We'll spirit the man up to New York and have him do plates for *us*."

"Why should I doublecross Klaus to help your outfit?"

Now Litwhiler smiled. "Because we'll guarantee a price fifteen percent lower than the best Klaus can do. And \$25,000 cash to you for your services. It's only good business, Lowney."

"*Mister* Lowney," I rapped.

"Sorry. But how do you feel about it?"

"I haven't talked terms with Klaus yet."

"Whenever you do. We guarantee to undercut him. We want those plates, Mr. Lowney. And/or the engraver. And you can get him for us."

I leaned back and stretched. "I'll think it over. My boss always has an eye out for cost-cutting."

"This is one chance he shouldn't pass up."

"Where can I get in touch with you, Litwhiler?"

He gave me a card. It bore the address of a jewelry firm on 47th Street in Manhattan. "Ask for Harold," he said. "That's me. I'll be driving back to New York tonight. Klaus would flay me if he ever caught me here alone."

I told him I'd be in touch, and went back upstairs. News traveled fast in the underworld. I was accustomed to that. But I hadn't expected this.

So it was a tug-of-war for the engraver, eh? With Litwhiler tugging from New York, Klaus from Philly. And me for the U.S. Government. Three-way tugs are always interesting. I just hoped the engraver didn't get pulled apart in the process.



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