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From **A DIET OF TREACLE**

Shank was being followed. Shank heard the pattern of footsteps behind him and saw the familiar figure visible again and then again over his left shoulder. Shank's first reactions were automatic. He stopped abruptly, wheeled, headed across the street and doubled back along the block. As Shank turned he spotted a man wearing a grey overcoat and a droopy felt hat shading the face—the latter dodge not enough to arouse suspicions, but enough to conceal the man's features adequately.

The tail was sharp. He continued walking in the same direction about ten paces before he turned and began following Shank once more.

All right. Shank had a tail. Now he had to keep the tail from realizing that his presence had been detected. If the tail knew Shank were on to him, the whole game would become that much harder. Shank had not decided whether to shake the tail or lead him to the upper reaches of the Bronx; in either case, it would be best to keep the tail in the dark.

Shank stepped inside the first corner drugstore and moved to the counter to buy cigarettes. Evidently the tail had not yet caught on because Shank could see him through the window as he—Shank—bent down to pick up a coin he managed to drop. Shank also ascertained he had never seen the tail before.

After lighting a cigarette to make his purchase seem a natural one, Shank left the store and ambled down the street as he thought about the tail. He wondered where the guy had picked him up. Shank had quit the BMT at Union Square. The drugstore was at Broadway and Tenth. This meant the tail had been with him all the way from the meet with Mau-Mau or had just picked him up on the street.

Shank tended to reject the second possibility. He rarely rode the BMT from Times Square, rarely got off at 14th Street, rarely walked along Broadway. The first possibility struck him as being much more likely. Could the guy have been with him on the subway? It was possible. And if he had been, and if he had seen the meet with Mau-Mau and knew what was happening, there might be trouble. A lot of trouble.

The Mau-Mau was a middleman, a sort of wholesaler. Most of the marijuana smoked in the United States was raised in Mexico and smuggled across the border. If the shipment were part of a syndicate operation, nobody needed the Mau-Mau. If, on the other hand, the guy who brought it in were a freelance hauling across a pound or two at a time, the Mau-Mau operated. He bought it by the pound and sold it by the ounce to the small pushers, and he profited enough at this to keep up one of the posh pads in one of the posh sections of Harlem.

About an hour ago the Mau-Mau had laid three ounces of very choice merchandise on Shank in exchange for twenty-five dollars. The three ounces nestled in a small, brown envelope in Shank's back pocket.

Which meant that Shank was hotter than a rat in a smoky sewer.

Shank took a right turn at First Avenue and headed down in the general direction of his room. Stalling for time, he stopped at a candy store on First between Ninth and Tenth, took a seat at the counter and ordered a chocolate egg cream. He had to think through this situation.

The tail, whoever he was, had not tried to bust Shank while he had been with

the Mau-Mau. Maybe the Mau-Mau had the tail bought and the guy was trying to make his quota on small pushers. Maybe the guy was afraid to make a pinch in Harlem. Maybe, for that matter, the guy figured Shank had a heavier bundle at his pad, in which case the tail probably had not the slightest idea of where Shank lived, which was fine with Shank. If his pad had been known the fuzz would have arrested him on the street and would have had somebody else bust the pad. But this wasn't the way the game was being played.

Shank sipped at the egg cream and wished he had ordered something more drinkable. He thought of leaving the thing unfinished but passed up the idea because he had to appear straight all the way.

Suppose, Shank thought, he didn't go back to the pad? That would prevent the joker from finding out Shank's address, but it would also practically invite an arrest. And Shank was holding three big ounces.

Suppose he shook the tail? That wouldn't be too hard to do, not with the joker shadowing him on foot. Just take a corner fast and hop into a cab and goodbye, tail. But there were two things wrong with such a course of action. For one thing, suppose this were a double-shadow job—Shank losing one man only to have the other stick with him, which would mean the end of the ball game. Or suppose Shank would make it clean?—then the guy would be after Shank for the rest of his life. Would that be good?

No—the best move would be to lead the tail right back to the room. There was less than an ounce in the room, anyway, and the most Shank could get for that would be a year and a day. There were two raps for possession of marijuana—straight possession of any amount, and possession with intent to sell. Just holding was a misdemeanor, but if you held enough so that they could call it possession with intent you caught a felony rap.

Under an ounce was definitely just holding, pure and simple. But how about three ounces? That might go either way. Shank was not sure.

He finished the egg cream and sauntered out of the candy store, his mind made up. He had to head straight for his pad and get rid of the stuff in his pocket before he was in the door. If he could ditch the rest, fine. If not—well it was a year and a day, and for a first offense he might get off with a suspended sentence. This was the safest way to play it.

He saw the tail over his left shoulder when he went out the door. Shank strode down First to Saint Mark's, pacing at his usual speed. He turned at the corner, spotting the tail again as he did so, and headed toward his own building.

Now how in hell was he going to ditch the stuff? Three ounces was three ounces—a hell of a lot to chuck in the river. The stuff around his pad was nothing, less than an ounce and not the best stuff in the world, anyway. But what he had in his pocket was top-grade and he was looking forward to a stick or two himself. He had twenty-five dollars invested in it, and by the time he would have it softened a little with Bull Durham he would have close to a bill's worth right there. Sixty bucks if he sold it by the ounce, but a bill easy if you figured the guys who bought a stick or two at a buck a stick.

And who in the hell wanted to throw away a bill, Shank thought savagely.

He stopped and pulled out the pack of cigarettes. His own building was just three doors away now and he had not managed to solve everything to his satisfaction. Suppose—Shank sweated to concentrate—suppose he planted the stuff somewhere inside the building but not inside the apartment? That way it probably wouldn't be found, and if it were they would have a rough time pinning it to him.

But where would he stash it so the guy would miss it and nobody else would walk off with it? It would be one hell of a joke if Shank could manage to keep it from the cop only to have one of the local yokels wind up with it.

When he reached the door he decided he had to find out how far back the tail was hanging. He chanced a quick glance around and spotted him a few doors down the street. That gave Shank plenty of room if he played it right.

He opened the door and went inside. He glanced around the vestibule but it never had looked barer than it did just then. Where the hell...?

It seemed obvious when he saw it. Shank walked to the mailboxes and dropped the envelope of marijuana into a slot marked MRS. HERMAN RODJINCKSZI, praying silently that Mrs. Herman Rodjinckszi would stay away from her mailbox for the next couple of hours.

Then he took the stairs two at a time, wondering how long the tail would stay on the street before he decided to have a look inside.

He closed the door, sliding the bolt into place. Then he raced around the apartment, grabbing the half-empty brown envelope from the table, snatching up the packet of cigarette papers although there was nothing illegal about owning them, picking up also the sack of Bull Durham on the off chance some pot was mixed in with the tobacco. He hadn't remembered spicing up that particular sack but there was no point taking chances.

The toilet worked on the first flush for the first time in a good three weeks. He flushed it again for the sheer hell of it and let himself relax completely for the first time since he had spotted the tail.

The relaxation did not last. Suppose Joe had left the stick someplace around? Suppose there was a roach on the floor somewhere? Christ, all the cops needed was a grain of the stuff and they could stick you with possession if they wanted you badly enough. Suppose the son of a—

A knock sounded at the door.

He took a quick look around. He glanced under the bed, finding nothing.

"Open up there. Police."

Police—well, that wasn't much of a surprise, Shank chuckled to himself. He opened the door.

Close up, the tail seemed meek and unimpressive. He could have been sitting across from Shank in the subway all the way from 125th Street without Shank having been aware of him. But the man's eyes indicated toughness and capability.

"Want to let me in?" the tail said.

"Want to show me your credentials?"

The man was Detective First Grade Peter J. Samuelson, Narcotics Bureau. Which, come to think of it—Shank gave a mental shrug—wasn't much of a surprise either.

"C'mon inside," he said.

Detective Samuelson went through the motions then, but it was obvious he no longer expected to discover anything. The first look at Shank's face had told him the place was clean. Samuelson bothered with a search only on the off chance he might strike uranium. He made Shank stand with his hands on the wall while he went through his pockets. All he found were two opened packs of cigarettes, a wallet with a few dollars and some uninteresting cards, and the knife.

"You expecting trouble?" the detective inquired.

Shank gave no reply.

"There's a law against knives like this," the detective pointed out softly. "Can't

buy 'em, can't sell 'em, can't own 'em. I could haul you in on this and let you cool off in the Tombs."

"That what they got you boys doing? Looking around for switchblades?"

And now the cop said nothing.

"You pick four kids off the street," Shank delivered the brief lecture. "Pick up any four kids and three of them got knives like that one. Bigger, most of them."

The cop laughed, unpleasantly. He pressed the button and the blade of the knife shot out. The cop looked at the knife for several seconds, closed it and dropped it into Shank's pocket.

"Here," he said, "keep your toy."

Shank fell silent.

The cop went ahead and checked the room. He knew all the right places—the toilet tank, the window sill, under the mattress, inside the shoes by the bed. Shank wore a pair of desert boots and the cop double-checked them because there was enough room in the toe to hold illegal merchandise.

The cop combed just about everything, and while he did he cursed softly to himself because he knew that the search would do no good. Somehow or other Shank had tumbled to him and ditched the stuff, and it was a cinch it was nowhere around the apartment.

Well, it served Detective Samuelson right. He knew he should have collared the little bastard on the street instead of taking chances. Next time he would know better.

"Okay," Samuelson said, finally. "I guess you're clean."

Shank smiled.

"When did you make me?" the detective asked casually.

Shank shrugged. His eyes said he could not possibly be familiar with what the cop was talking about but the cop knew better.

"When you turned around," the cop said, reflecting aloud. "Sure. You already had cigarettes. I should have known—I saw you with one before you got on the subway. And you didn't throw away an empty pack. I should have picked you up the minute you walked into the drugstore."

Shank smiled again.

"I was working close," the cop said, rubbing his nose ruefully. "I should have figured on you spotting me but I thought I was clear. How did you happen to notice me?"

"You were lousy," Shank summed it up.

For a minute the cop looked as though he were ready to explode. Then his features relaxed.

"You won this round," he said. "How many more do you think you'll win?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't. You'll know what I'm talking about when we get you, punk, and don't think we're not going to get you sooner or later. You were clean until today. We didn't know you were alive. Now we know and we won't forget until we nail the lid on."

Shank kept silent.

"Sooner or later you'll be holding and we'll be on to you. Sooner or later you'll slip and we'll grab you. We'll watch you so hard you won't be able to hit the toilet without looking over your shoulder to see who's there."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," the cop said.

"You try to watch every guy who's selling and you'll need more men than you got on the whole force. You got any idea how many guys are selling?"

"A fair idea."

"Lots of them, aren't there?"

"Too many."

"Well, how are you gonna—"

"We won't watch 'em all," the cop said. "Just the ones we know about. And we know about you."

Shank said nothing for a moment. He was enjoying the conversation but at the same time he was annoyed the cops were on to him.

"What the hell," Shank said. "I don't know what you're so burned about. I wasn't holding anyway."

The cop laughed again.

"I wasn't," Shank defended himself. "I—"

"You took a good three ounces off the Mau-Mau," the cop said. "Probably more. And in case you're wondering, we busted the Mau-Mau just after you left. It's the third time for him, the third intent rap, and this means the Mau-Mau has a home for the rest of his life as a guest of the United States Government. You might want to think about that for awhile."

The cop left.

Two hours later Shank smashed Mrs. Herman Rodjinckszi's mailbox with a hammer and reclaimed the envelope.

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