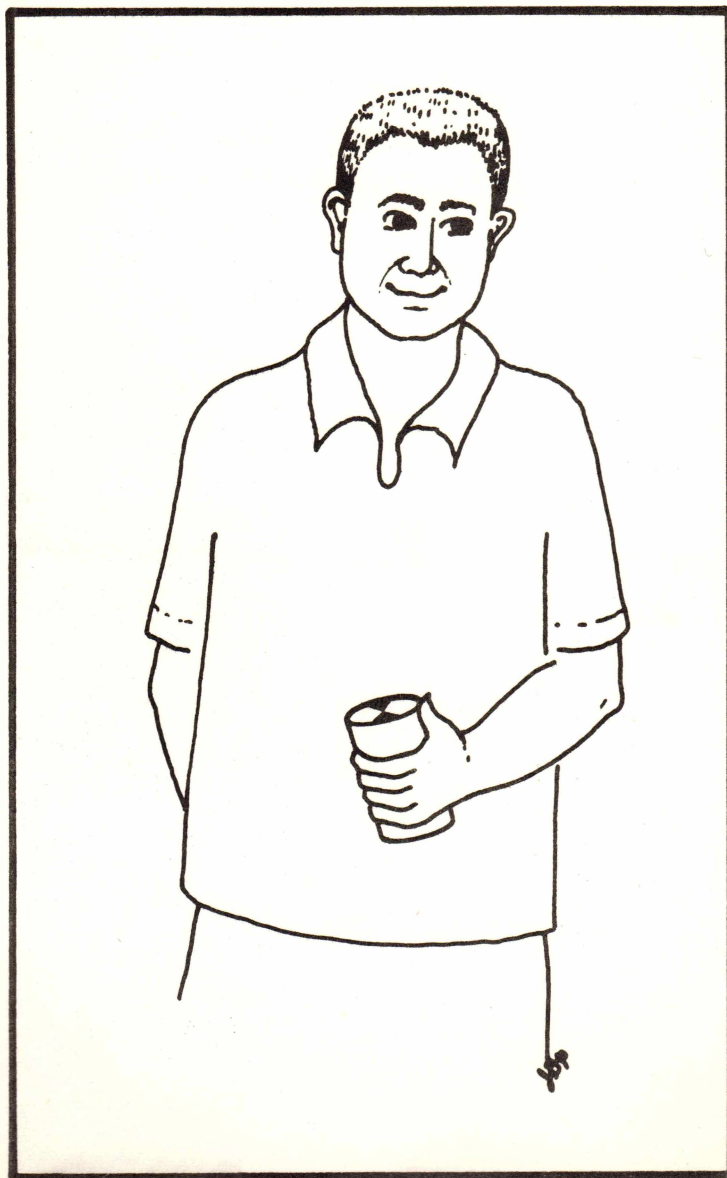


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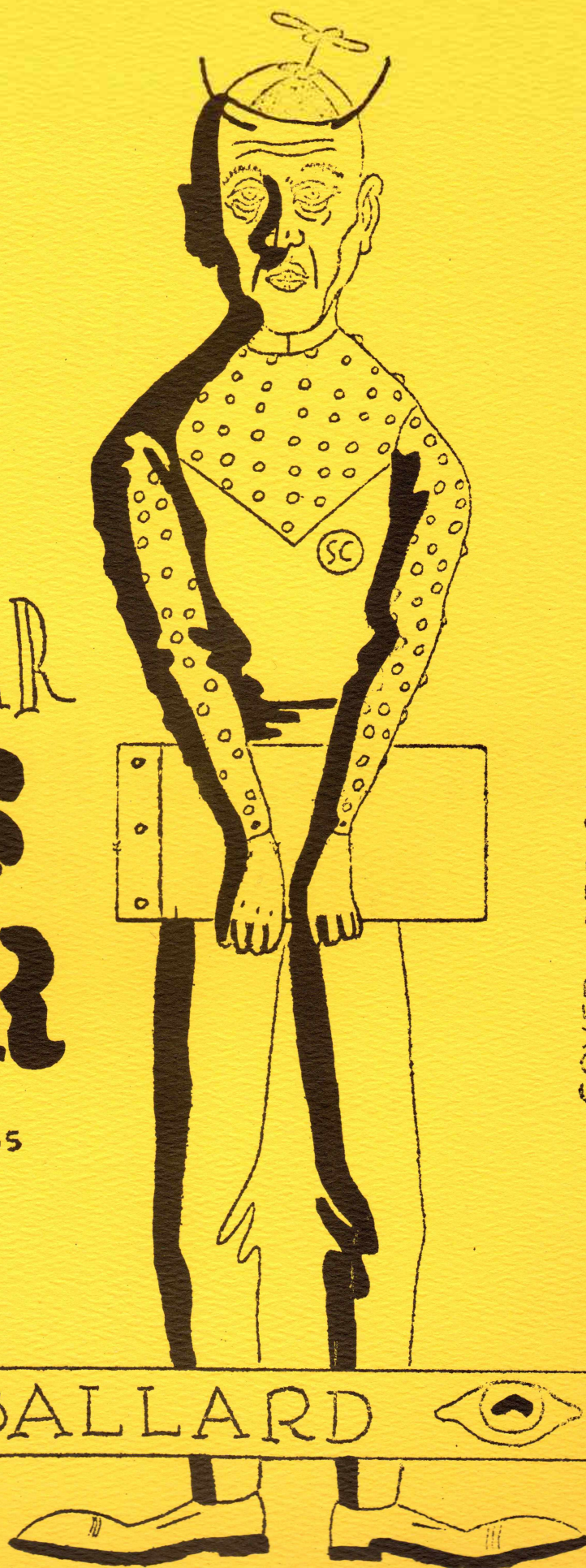
BALLARD
CHRONICLES
(installment 1)

the
SPECTACULAR
**SAPS
CAPER**

by LEE JACOBS

STARRING

WRAI BALLARD



COVER DESIGN BY TOM REAMY

THE BALLARD CHRONICLES (INSTALLMENT 1)

The Spectacular SAPS Caper

Starring

WRAI BALLARD,
PRIVATE EYE

"I silped my Nuclear Fizz in the insurgent manner."

WRAI BALLARD

CHAPTER I

He was a goofy looking character. I'm used to seeing goofy looking characters in my business, but he looked goofier than most. His beanie, pale vermillion with a vividly contrasting chartreuse rotor, was tilted at an impossible angle over obviously dyed antennae, and he clutched a pair of stencils like they were early Mystery Tales. "Are you Mr. Ballard?" he asked, glancing out the open window behind me.

The guy was scared. In another minute he'd be diving out that window without an anti-grav suit, and I didn't want that to happen. If the jerk killed himself in my office I'd have another session with Captain Drummond down at homicide, and Drummond hated my guts. So I put on the leer that I usually reserved for paying clients, and told him that, yes, I was Wrai Ballard, I was a private investigator just like it said on the sign outside, and what could I do for him?

I don't know whether it was the leer or my suave manner, but he reacted just like he'd just finished an order of spaghetti and chocolate milk with a ketchup-bedecked filet mignon for dessert. "Thank Roscoe!" he said. "I thot you were one of them. They followed me here, you know. They follow me everywhere. But they won't get it. They... ."

"Whoa," I said. He was not only scared, but stark, raving crazy. "Who are 'they,' and why are they following you? For that matter, who are you? And before we go any further, my rates are thirty bucks a day plus expenses. I'll also accept Clayton Astoundings in mint condition and Virgil Finlay originals."

One of his antennae became unglued and fell to the floor. He didn't pick it up. Instead, he reached inside his Space Cadet jacket, and placed a thick stack of bills on my desk. Perhaps I was the one who was stark, raving crazy. The top bill was a fifty.

He smiled weakly. "Don't worry about money. There's nine hundred dollars here, and when that's gone, there'll be more. I'd like to hire you full time. They'll stop at nothing, and I don't want them to have it. It would be disasterous in the wrong hands. Mraoc." His voice became excited and ended up in an obscene gurgle.

Things were happening just a little too fast for me. Two minutes ago I'd been sitting peacefully at my desk, admiring the new Bergeron cover on the latest Science Fiction Plus, and wondering where I was going to scrape up last week's office rent. Now this fantastic creep storms into my sanctum, plops more money on my desk than I've seen since I sold Coswal my Argosy collection, and starts screeching about his being followed by persons or e-t's unknown. I needed a drink.

I took the office bottle out of the drawer and poured him one, too. He looked like he could use a jolt. After all, he was paying for them; drinks are a legitimate expense in my business.

We silped our Nuclear Fizzes in the insurgent manner.

"I needed that," he said. "I can feel it reaching critical mass. Normally I have a high type mind and broad mental horizons. I think in cosmic concepts. But these last few months... . Well, maybe I should begin at the beginning."

I muttered something dirty under my breath about long-winded jerks, and told him that yes, it might help to start at the beginning, since I couldn't protect it against them until I knew what I had to protect against whom. He looked shocked.

"Haven't I already told you?" He replaced his antennae with dignity. "My name is Gordon Black, I'm President of the Spectator Amateur Press Society."

That made me blink. Gordon Black wasn't just a man; he was a living legend. In his younger days he'd been a typical LNF, but when he became President of SAPS, his mutant executive ability built the organization and himself up to the heretofore insurmountable heights of social and financial success. I began to wonder why Black had chosen me! He had a complete staff of some of the best investigators in the country.

"Gosh," I said, "Wowboyoboy. But why have you chosen me? Don't you have a complete staff of some of the best investigators in the country?"

He silped his Nuclear Fizz in the insurgent manner. "That's just it; it's too complete. They have their spies planted everywhere. I came here because I don't know you, and they don't know you. I tried to disguise myself as a Neofan, but that didn't fool them. They followed me here. I don't even know if I'll get out of here alive. But whatever happens to me, your job is to keep these out of their hands."

He placed the stencils down on the desk with reverence and shaking hands. They were standard blue ABDicks; nothing special that I could see. But he treated them like first edition mint Mecromanticons with dust jackets. Great Beer, this was a crazy mess. I silped the last Nuclear Fizz from the bottle in the insurgent manner, and wanted another drink.

"Excuse me," I said, "I have to..."

He gave a yell like a pro selling Galaxy. "You aren't leaving. I know you're human, and I don't see one in here, but couldn't you possibly wait until..."

That made me grin a little. "Don't worry," I said. "It's two doors down on the left, but I'm only going to the refrigerator on the other side of the room. I have my Nuclear Fizzes in bottles. They're much more economical that way."

I stepped from behind my desk and started for the refrigerator, but I never got that bottle. Within sixty seconds, Black was dead and the police were pounding on my door.

CHAPTER II

I didn't hear the shot. I was too busy concentrating on the second bottle of Nuclear Fizzes. During our conversation I'd been in front of Black all the time, with the open window behind me. As soon as I started for the refrigerator, the murderer had a clean shot at Black through the window. Black looked surprised when the bullet hit him; he crumpled to the floor with a dull splat.

There was no sense looking out the window. The building across the street had at least ten places where a guy could draw a bead on my office. So instead I put the nine hundred bucks in my pocket. I'm practical.

Black was dripping blood all over my nice clean carpet. He had died instantly; at least I thought he had died instantly. I was wrong. He twitched. He was still alive.

I rushed over to him. "Take it easy. I'll call a doctor."

There was a knock on the door.

"Save your nickel," he said. "I'm gone." His voice grew weaker, and I had to place my head close to his face to hear his whisper. His antennae tickled my forehead. "See

Karen at Redd's Place. Mention Pthalo. She can be trusted. Don't let it fall into their hands..." His voice faded into nothingness, and I was bending over a corpse.

The knocking on the door turned into an angry pounding. "Open up, Ballard," a voice roared, "I know you're in there." I could recognize that voice anywhere. Could it be coincidence that Captain Drummond arrived when I had a dead body in my office?

There wasn't anything I could do. I didn't have any fire escape, and even if I did throw the body out the window, I'd have to explain the bloodstains on the carpet. So I decided to be big and brave and let the Captain in. I didn't have anything to worry about. I didn't kill him.

"Open the door yourself, flatfoot," I yelled pleasantly. "It's unlocked." Drummond was sensitive about his feet. His early days on the force were spent pounding a beat, and he didn't like to be reminded of it. I didn't have anything against Drummond, personally. He was a good cop, a very good cop. It takes a good cop to become a Captain in this city. But Drummond didn't approve of the slightly unorthodox methods I use in my work, and I didn't approve of the slightly orthodox methods Drummond used in his work. We hated each others guts.

He stormed into the room like he expected to find a dead body. He did. "Okay, Ballard," he said. "Hold out your hands and come along quietly."

"Wait a minute," I said. I wasn't particularly worried. Drummond rarely goes off half-cocked, but in my case he's inclined to be prejudiced. "Don't get carried away. I didn't do anything."

"No, you didn't do anything." The good Captain was feeling sarcastic. "I receive a tip that I'd find a dead body in your room, and, by Foofoo, I do. That's enough for me. Let's go."

A frame! Somebody, whoever was after Black, I guess, was trying to frame me. They'd followed Black to my office. They saw us talking, but unless they could read lips, they didn't know what we were talking about. So they decided that, whatever he told me, before I could act on the information I would find myself behind bars, charged with murder. That made me mad. Black was a fine man, and famous throughout the entire country, but from what I'd seen of him, he was a goofy looking character. But he'd given me the nine hundred bucks that I had in my pocket, and the buys that were after him had tried to frame me. They picked the wrong dope.

"Look, Drummond," I said. "Let's get this over with. You know me. Would I be silly enough to murder a man in my office? You mau not realize it, but this guy is Gordon Black, the Gordon Black. What do you take me for? I was sitting peacefully in my office, admiring the new Bergeron cover on the latest Science Fiction Plus, when this goofy looking character comes into my sanctum screeching about people who were after him. They caught up with him before I could do anything about it. Get the lab boys down here. They'll tell you that the blaster must have been fired from across the street. Check the building tenants, and I'll bet you'll find that a Mr. Smith, or Jones, or McNeil rented a room within the last hour. My Beer, Drummond, use your brains!" I didn't say anything about the nine hundred bucks.

He listened patiently, and I could see him turning this information over in his mind. Drummond was no dope. He hated my guts, and he would never give me a break, but he wouldn't haul me down to the station unless he had an iron-clad case.

"Okay," he said. "I'll check. I may have rocks in my head, but I'll check. But, so help me Foofoo, if you try to leave town I'll slap you behind bars faster than a neofan's mimeo."

ne started to leave, but I stopped him. "I won't say thanks. I didn't do anything. But somebody wanted to make you think I did something. I don't like being framed. I'm going to find out who did it, and then turn him over to you. I don't promise what condition he'll be in, but you'll get him. Now get out of here. I have work to do."

We had a staring contest; Drummond won. "We have your blaster pattern on file down at the station. If we find anything like it on one of the DOA's we'll come after you, Ballard. That's a warning!" He stalked out, all five-one of him quivering in rage.

I thot I'd handled myself pretty well in that encounter. I'd gotten out of a fairly messy situation, but I hadn't revealed any vital information. And I still had the nine hundred bucks in my pocket. But I forgot one thing. I had a body in here, and in a few days it would be smelling. So I rushed to the door and shouted at Drummond's broad bulk waddling down the hall, "And, Drummond, don't forget to send a crew over here for the body!"

He growled something obscene over his shoulder and vanished around the corner. Typical Drummond reaction. Since he didn't say anything to me about guarding the body until the doctor arrived, I decided to take off. I didn't think Black would run away.

Drummond had said something about my pattern being on file down at the station. I decided to alter the pattern. It wouldn't do too well, if I did shoot someone, with Drummond in his present condition. So I walked behind my desk and reached in the drawer for my gun.

It wasn't there!

CHAPTER III

I liked that weapon. You don't often find a variable-nozzle blaster mounted on a proton pistol frame, and I'd modified this model for interchangeable orifices, for self-protection. Each blaster orifice is given an individual spectrographic pattern on manufacture, and these patterns are filed with the FBI, but I picked up some foreign orifices when I was overseas. I had it made.

Yeah, I had it made -- until my gun was stolen. I knew who took the gun. In a few hours, or maybe even sooner, some public-spirited citizen would mail the gun to headquarters. When the lab made a few comparisons with Black's corpse, Drummond would really be out to get me. The frame was turning into a noose.

Black, in all his talking, never gave me any really serious and constructive information. Or had he? "See Karen at Redd's Place." "Mention Pthalo." Who was Karen? Where was Redd's Place? That was my only lead. Now I had toe problem of disposing of those special stencils. Black had been killed for them. Whoever shot Black knew I had them. I decided to play it safe and let the Postal Department take care of them for a while, so I placed the stencils in a large envelope, stuck some stamps on the outside, and addressed it to Martin Alger, General Delivery, Slan Center.

The stencils were already cut, but I couldn't make any sense out of what was on them. I never was any good at codes, and this information was definitely in code. There was a list of names in one column, of addresses in another column, and weird combinations of letters and numbers in the third column. Black probably had the key in his head, but he wouldn't tell me now.

I didn't have time to worry about it. Soon my blaster would be at the station. I had to move, and move fast.

I dropped the stencils into a corner mailbox and ducked into a drugstore. The girl behind the tobacco counter was an attractive wench, and any other time I'd have been glad to pull the old Ballard technique, but I had other things on my mind.

I bought a pack of Pall Malls and took the change in small coins. I had some telephoning to do.

I had to find out the location of Redd's Place. Hal Shapiro would know if anyone would. Hal and I had been buddies overseas, and when the mess died down we came back to the states together. I opened my agency, but Hal decided that he didn't want to work for a living. He became a professional writer. He wrote a little bit about a lot of things, but his main beat was the underworld, and Black's death, plus my frame, was definitely the work of experienced parties.

I dialed his number and listened to the ringing of the phone. It rang and rang and rang some more, but I knew he was there. He never gets up before five p.m., and it was only three now. Finally I heard a click on the other end. "Why don't you get up at a decent hour with the rest of us slobs?" I said.

"Wrai! Wrai Ballard! Why you illigitimate spawn of a demented bem!" We were great friends.

I sketched Hal in on what had happened so far, and he was properly sympathetic. I concluded with "So you see, Hal, I have a problem. Do you know anything about Karen or Redd's Place? And have you heard anything around town about parties or e-t's unknown who were out to get Black?"

"No-o-o," he said slowly, "I don't know of any Karen, and..." I could feel my slim lead fading away like modern Weird Tales. Then I heard a wild war whoop on the other end. "I've got it! Redd's Place is a small bar down on skid row. Those in the know say it's a hangout for some of Banker Winne's mob. Wait a minute, and I'll give you the address from my card files."

Banker Winne! Was he mixed up in this? Banker Winne was as famous as Black, but in an entirely different way. While Black was building an empire for himself and SAPS, Winne had been a lieutenant for Dapper Howard Devore, a mobster who was deported while I was overseas. After Devore left the country, Winne took over the mob, and with the returns of vice and crime ran a good part of town. He was a no-good from 'way back!

Hal returned to the phone and gave me the address. It was in the part of town that cops patrol in pairs. If I was going down there, I was going to be heeled.

"Thanks a lot, pal," I said. "If anything breaks, I'll give you first crack at the story." I jokingly added, "If you identify my body at the morgue, be sure to speak kindly of my in my obit." It didn't sound so funny out loud.

"Take care of yourself," Hal warned. "Winne's boys play for keeps. I wouldn't want anything to happen to that sensitive fannish face of yours; I'm waiting to see you get beat up by a jealous husband." We hung up and I stepped out of the booth. He was one swell guy.

The drug store was packed, but I made my way to the street like a neofan after Heinlein's autograph.

I grabbed a taxi and told the driver to take me to Blasters-by-Broderick, a small gun factory on the outskirts of town. Broderick owed me a few favors and now was the time to collect.

We covered the fifteen miles in thirteen minutes, so the cabby received a five dollar tip. Broderick's office was right on the first floor, and I gave his secretary a big smile as I walked in.

"Is the great big man in, G.M.?" I asked. "Just a minute, Mr. Ballard," she smiled. "He's in conference, but I know he'll talk to you." I liked G.M. I reminded myself to send her a box of candy. I wondered if the other member of Broderick's conference was blonde, brunette, or redhead.

He bounded out of his office with a big blob of lipstick on his face. "Cut myself while shaving," he grinned. "It's good to see you, Wrai. What gives?"

I gave him the same story as I did the others. "So you see, Elliot," I concluded, "I'm in a spot. I don't have a blaster of my own, and I wouldn't want one that could be traced to me. But I'll be going places where I'll need a blaster, and need it badly. Could you fix me up with an unregistered model? It isn't ethical, but....."

"Don't worry about a thing," he interrupted. "That's what friends are for. Have a drink while I run out to the production line." He grinned again. "Better get some of this blood off, first."

I silped my Nuclear Fizz in the insurgent manner. G.M. and I chatted about her oldest son, who was just starting to read stf, and I made her promise to wash his mouth out with soap if he ever said anything fannish. After the third silp, Broderick came back to the office with one of the most lethal blasters I've ever seen.

"This is the first of our new custom line. None of these models have been released yet, so don't worry about tracings. When you're finished with it, bring it back, and we'll throw in a few modifications." He winked mischievously. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go back into conference. The Board of Directors may get impatient." He waved his hand and went back into his office. I decided his next case of Nuclear Fizzes was going to be bottled in bond.

Unless, of course, I got killed first.

CHAPTER IV

Redd's Place looked like a typical skid row dive from the outside. A battered neon sign was valiantly advertising continuous entertainment at the afternoon shadows, and pictures of young ladies in various stages of undress peeked thru "fly-specked windows." I felt the comfortable weight of the blaster against my shoulder and started for the door.

"Psst." I felt a hand at my elbow and a whisper in my ear. "Feelthy pictures? Good books? The copy of Incinerations?" The pressure at my elbow grew insistant. I knew the voice. Racy Higgs usually hung around uptown, but he picked up his merchandise at various places along the row. He knew I wasn't interested in his wares. "Sure, Mac," I said loudly, in case anyone was watching, "let's take a walk."

He steered me into a small bar about three joints down from Redd's Place. After the waitress brought the Nuclear Fizzes, he started talking. "Hiya, Ballard. Long time no see." He chugalugged his Nuclear Fizz in the Kerkhof manner.

I had the waitress bring over half a dozen Nuclear Fizzes. I shoved them in front of Higgs. "What's on your mind, Racy?"

He licked his lips and chugalugged a Nuclear Fizz in the Kerkhof manner. "It'll cost 6.

you twenty."

I wasn't in any mood to argue; I didn't have enough time. "Give you ten and it'll be worth five," I snapped. "Give!"

"Okay," he whined, "don't get mad. You were going into Redd's Place, weren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I was in Redd's Place about ten minutes ago, when Bullyboy Briggs comes in. He looked real businesslike, if you know what I mean. I heard him tell Wee Willie Austin that he really fixed you good. I don't know what he means, but you might. Now ain't that worth more than ten bottles?"

I wanted to get rid of him. "That's worth a case," I said. "Here's fifty bucks. Don't spend it all in one place." I paid for the drinks and got out of there.

Bullyboy Briggs. What was he doing in this? Argeeboo was a mean boy. He was trigger-man for Banker Winne, and while I'd always been on good terms with the 'Banker,' I didn't have any love for that sadist Briggs.

I was still mulling this information when I walked into Redd's Place. I paused in the doorway and looked around. A girl was at the bar, seated between two soldiers, and laughing over something that sounded suspiciously like a not-poem. At one of the tables in the rear, a tall, well-built blond with an amiable expression was silping his Nuclear Fizz in the insurgent manner. That amiable expression didn't fool me. Bullyboy Briggs looks most amiable when he's pumping a bullet into somebody's back.

I sat at the bar and ordered a Nuclear Fizz. It was simple to tell who owned the place. The bartender had a thick shock of red hair. "Karen around?" I asked.

"That's her," he replied, "between the two doggies. Wanna see her?"

I wrote "Pthalo" down on a slip of paper and placed it on top of a dollar bill. "Just give her this note," I said, "and point me out to her. We're old friends."

He grinned knowingly. "I'll bet." The dollar bill vanished into below the bar and he handed the girl the note. I took a closer look at her. She was young, not over twenty-two, and somehow she didn't belong in this place. She looked like she'd be more at home behind a cyclotron than cadging drinks in a skid-row dive. She was doing her best to be good at her job, but I could see the work was distasteful to her. One of the soldiers said something obscene, and she winced.

She read the note and jumped like she'd spotted Campbell in the flesh. She whispered something to the bartender and I silped my Nuclear Fizz, in the insurgent manner.

"Karen wants that you should go up there," said the bartender. "You weren't lyin' when you said that you an' her were old friends."

I told him to give the group a drink on me, and walked over to them. Karen certainly played her part well. She gave me a big hello and introduced me around. "Boys," she said, "I want you to meet Bob Silverberg. He's an old friend. Bob, this is Sergeant Art Rapp and Private Richard Eney. Art's been telling me some poetry."

"Hi, fellas," I said. "I hope you won't mind, but I just got in town and haven't seen Karen for a long time. I'd like to talk to her for a while."

They looked at each other wearily. "That's okay," Eney said. "We were leaving anyway. Fans have a notoriously low sex drive."

I didn't know what he meant by that crack, but I steered Karen over to a booth and ordered a couple of Nuclear Fizzes. "My name is Wrai Ballard," I said. "I'm a private investigator. I was hired by Gordon Black to safeguard a pair of stencils. I don't know what this is all about, but Black said that you were to be trusted."

She clasped my hand impulsively, and I noticed her palm was smooth and warm. "He's not hurt, is he? They didn't get him?"

I tried to think of some way to break it to her. It was obvious that Black was something big in her life.

"Well... ."

Redd, himself, brought our Fizzes. That should have tipped me off, but I was too busy concentrating on Karen. I thought the Fizz tasted peculiar as I sipped it in the insurgent manner, but I didn't have time to think about it.

I blacked out immediately.

CHAPTER V

There was a 770-type party being held in my head, and somebody passed out with a jolt. That woke me up. I shook my head a few times, and the 770-type party died down to a mere convention.

"Bright boy's awake," a voice said. I opened my eyes and turned them in the direction of the voice. Bullyboy Briggs had a gleeful smirk on his face. "What's wrong, bright boy, drink something that didn't agree with you?"

I was in a small room bound to a chair; Karen was tied to another chair on the opposite side of the room. I still felt the weight of my blaster against my shoulder; Bullyboy was so sure of himself that he didn't even disarm me. "What now, boss?" he asked.

A door opened somewhere, and Banker Winne stepped into the room. He had his girlfriends with him. I'd heard about his girlfriends, but I didn't believe it. Both were beautiful in a deadly sort of way. The one on the left was a short and voluptuous redhead. The one on his right was a tall, svelte brunette. "Y'gonna work him over?" asked the redhead. "Yeah, work him over," chimed in the brunette. "First him and then the girl. Make it slow."

"Irene. Terry." The Banker smiled. "Don't mind the girls, Wrai. Sometimes they become a little excited. But it might save you and Karen a bit of -- ah -- discomfort, if you decided to cooperate and answer a simple little question."

I didn't have anything better to do so I tried to pull a bluff. "What are you talking about, Banker? I just wandered into Redd's Place for a drink, when I spotted my old friend Karen. I hadn't seen her in a long time, so I bought her a drink. Is there something wrong with that?"

"Work 'em over!" Terry and Irene snarled in unison.

Banker Winne wasn't smiling now. "Stop the stalling, Ballard. Bullyboy saw Black hand you the stencils when he gunned him down. Now where are they?"

I put on expression number three, complete bewilderment. "What stencils are you talking about?"

"Bright boy isn't so bright today, is he?" observed Bullyboy. "Lemme work him over, boss. When I get finished with him, he'll talk."

"Yeah," said Terry, "work him over." "The girl, too," added Irene.

The Banker was getting a little impatient. "Listen, Ballard, this is a big deal. Shapiro said you'd be difficult, but I thot you'd listen to reason..."

"Shapiro?" I yelled. "What does he have to do with this?" My mind was working at top speed. Stall. Get as much information as possible.

"Bright boy isn't bright at all," said Bullyboy.

"Work 'em over," said Irene. "Slow," reminded Terry.

"Ballard, I don't like to use force. I'll give you the entire story, and then you can tell us of your own free will." Generous, generous Banker! "You never knew that, before the past unpleasanties, Shapiro worked for Devore. When Hal came back from overseas, he became respectable. At least the cops thot so, which was what we wanted them to think. Actually, Hal is the contact man between Devore and us."

"Oh?" I said.

"Now, I have substantial interests in the Fantasy Amateur Press Association. And since Black, may he never drink another Beer, built up SAPS to its present strength, those interests have taken a tremendous loss. Last week, Devore, through Shapiro, gave me the go-ahead to offer a plan for the merger of SAPS and FAPA. All I want are the names and addresses of the present members of SAPS."

Karen hadn't said anything during our little tête-a-tête, but now she spoke. "What he didn't say, Wrai, was that after he obtained the SAPS mailing list he was going to murder every SAPS member so FAPA could make good its boast about having the best organization in stf ajay. Don't tell him anything, Wrai. I don't care what they do to me, but SAPS must go on." She started sobbing quietly.

"Well," demanded the Banker, "are you going to tell us, or must we get unpleasant?"

"Goody!" exclaimed Terry. "Nice and slow," reminded Irene.

I spat out the most obscene thing I could think of. "Read Shaver!"

The Banker went rigid at the insult. "Okay, Bullyboy, he's all yours."

Bullyboy's eyes glinted in anticipation.

CHAPTER VI

With dexterity from long practice, he made preparations. "I used to be a fan," he chuckled. "Now I am a fake fan."

I didn't know exactly what to expect. I knew Bullyboy Briggs was a sadist because I had seen some of his victims, but he had a variety of techniques. I watched with morbid fascination as he brought out his materials.

"The Amazing rejects," suggested Irene. "Yeah, read 'em some Amazing rejects," echoed Terry.

Amazing rejects! Briggs wasn't a sadist; he was inhuman!

Banker Winne began to sip a Nuclear Fizz in the insurgent manner.

I steeled myself for the coming ordeal. "Safeguard the stencils," sobbed Karen. "Would you want FAPA to stand alone?" Terry and Irene exchanged anticipating whispers, and I appealed to Beer to give me strength.

"The Shaver," offered Terry. "Yeah," said Irene, "work 'em over good. Read 'em the Shaver that rap rejected." They leered together.

Briggs looked at them fondly. "Dolls."

I closed my eyes and heard his voice. "When you have had enough, just scream. Rather, scream that you are ready to talk. I know you'll be screaming after the first sentence. It doesn't affect me. I am a fake fan."

Terry and Irene giggled delightedly.

"Stand fast," said Karen fervently. "Cling to the glory that is SAPS." She looked at me with the light of true conviction in her eyes.

"I've Forgotten Lemuria," intoned Briggs. "Chapter one. The green goddess..."

Briggs never finished the line. Somewhere, somehow, a blaster got him in the head, and the room was filled with cops.

I don't like cops. If there were no cops, private eyes like me could make a lot more money. But at that moment I felt like giving every one of them a complete set of Unknown. Drummond himself cut me loose, and he was grinning like a neofan at his first convention. I saw Broderick behind him, this time without any lipstick.

"My Beer, people," I said, "what a surprise. How did you know where to find me?"

Drummond looked rather modest. "We've been trying to get something on the Banker for some time, so natch we had a tail on him. And Broderick phoned; seems like he had trailed you to Redd's Place... ."

"The Board of Directors could wait," said Broderick. "I am a true fan."

"And when he saw you pass out," continued Drummond, "he knew you must have been drugged. Broderick knows how much you can drink. So, between the two of us, we've covered you all the way. You woulda been disturbed before, but I wanted to make sure I had a case against the Banker."

Broderick winked. "I caught Bullyboy Briggs with a new type blaster that we are going to introduce. Why don't you buy one?"

I winked back at him. "Just might do that."

Drummond scowled at both of us, mentioning something about Broderick's never resisting the opportunity to make himself a sale. We both laughed at him.

Karen rushed over to me, her beautiful face filled with sorrow. "Black did not die in vain. I will proclaim myself the next OE of SAPS and build it up to even more glorious heights."

I gazed into her eyes; I knew I was lost. "Perhaps," I breathed, "you would have room

for me along with SAPS. We could build it up to even more glorious heights together."

Drummond's raucous voice shattered our new-found romance. "I don't mean to be interrupting anything, but kindly hold your smooching until we get the bodies cleared out of here."

"Don't mind him," I said. "He's been married for years." But Drummond had broken my concentration on the gorgeous creature that was Karen. I remembered my old friend Hal Shapiro, my true buddy that I knew overseas. That triple-crossing Hal Shapiro. I decided to pay him a visit, and the blaster weighed heavily on my shoulder.

I excused myself all around, gave Karen one last adoring glance, promised her my undying love, and took off for Shapiro's apartment.

I wanted to see the look on his face when I walked in there alive!

CHAPTER VII

Hal Shapiro occupied a penthouse in one of the city's better hotels. It was expensive; I thought the writing racket must pay pretty well for him to live there. I didn't know then that he was Dapper Devore's contact man. I nodded to Jacobs at the desk and started for the elevator.

"Just a moment, Mr. Ballard." Jacobs called me over. "Mr. Shapiro isn't in at the moment, but he'll be back shortly. Would you care to leave a message?"

Shapiro was a sly one, but he didn't fool me. "Thank you, Jacobs," I said. "Just tell Hal that I'll stop by later." If Shapiro had stepped out, then Gernsback likes Planet. He wanted me to think he was out, knowing that in that case I would go up to his apartment and wait for him. As soon as I would pick the lock, he would blast me in my tracks. I decided to play it cool and go up to his penthouse, but in an entirely different manner.

I walked to the side of the hotel and went in thru the servants' entrance. A service elevator took me up to the fifteenth floor, and I used the fire escape the rest of the way. I managed to enter Shapiro's bedroom without making any noise, and quietly opened the door to his living room. He was reading the latest FAPA mailing, and chuckling over a Rotsler drawing.

"Hiya, Hal," I said casually, levelling my blaster at him.

"Why you illegitimate spawn of a demented bem." He managed a weak grin. "I didn't hear you come in." Rotsler didn't seem to fascinate him any more, for some reason.

"Look at what's in my hand, Hal," I snapped. "This isn't a variable-nozzle blaster on a proton pistol frame, but it'll blow a hole in you just as big."

The grin went off his face, and he began to tremble. In another minute he'd be down on his knees. "I-I-I'll make a deal with you, Wrai. I have half a million dollars in five different banks. Half of it is yours if you'll let me go."

Half of half a million. That was a lot of loot, but sometimes there are more important things than money. I didn't even consider it. Karen had SAPS, and we were going to build up SAPS to even more glorious heights together.

"You're finished."

He started toward me, promising all sorts of fantastic things. "Take the whole half million, Wrai. It's all yours. You cna start a professional fanzine with that much money. You'll be the biggest of the BNF's, Wrai. Every day will bring you more ego-boo... ."

He stopped talking when I shot him in the stomach. I watched him crawl slowly across the floor.

"How could you do this to me, Wrai?" he gasped, his voice filled with pain. "How could you blast me down, your best friend? How?"

I stared directly into his glazing eyes and spat out three words.

"It was easy!"

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SIX GUN
SERENADE

The Ballard chronicles

(installment II)



STARRING
WRAI BALLARD,
THE MUSQUITE KID

TOM REAMY

THE BALLARD CHRONICLES (INSTALLMENT 2)

Six Gun Serenade

Starring

WRAI BALLARD,
THE MUSQUITE KID

"Wrai Ballard, Private Eye, makes Mike Hammer look like a member of the LASTS."

JOE FANN

ALL CHARACTERS AND EVENTS IN THE BALLARD CHRON-
ICLES ARE ENTIRELY FICTITIOUS. IF THE NAME OF
ANY PERSON, LIVING OR DEAD, OR OF ANY EXISTING
INSTITUTION IS USED, IT IS A CONINCIDENCE.....

CHAPTER I

They say Buffalo Bill Cody was a good man with a gun. Bat Masterson had a right fair draw, too. The James Boys and the Younger brothers wouldn't back down to nobody, and Billy the Kid Bonney did some purty fancy shootin' fer a youngun.

Well, I've seen 'em all, mister, an' I say they was all jist a bunch of spavined mavericks compared to Wrai Ballard, the Musquite Kid.

Now I ain't sayin' that cos I used t'be his sidekick. Me an' the Kid sashayed 'round quite a bit together back in the old days afore the West got this so-called civilization an' the Kid hung up his guns. But while Wrai was shootin' he was the meanest man with a hawglaig there ever was.

Wrai Ballard, the Musquite Kid, was allus a easy-goin' hombre. He never went 'round lookin' fer trouble, but it allus found him. Seems like there was some son in every town who mistook that star-begotten look o' Wrai's fer that of a Shaver fan and would start in crowdin'. Shucks, there wouldn't be anythin' Wrai could do 'ceptin' give him a third eye with Judge Colt. Don't think the Kid ever stayed in one place longer'n take a neofan to publish a subzine.

But Ballard didn't mind. He'd jist saddle up Robert Glenn Briggs and we'd wide to another town. The Kid was as good at cards as he was with a six-gun, so we always had a well-filled poke. He'd been going to conventions for years.

Nobody knew where Wrai Ballard come from; not even me, an' I rec'lect I knew him better'n anybody else. When I asked the Kid, he'd jist smile shyly and toss me the latest SAPS mailing. Kinda secretive, the Kid was. Heered he learned to shoot defendin' his Argosy and Blue Book collections agin renegade injuns, but I paid no mind to it. All sorts of stories circulate 'bout a slinger as fast as the Kid.

Take that one about how he got his horse, Robert Glenn Briggs. Reckon Robert Glenn Briggs is the fastest, smartest roan this side of the 'Sippi, an' some will have you think the Kid stole him.

But that ain't rightly true, no more'n the Kid bein' six foot four and built like a gorilla, with his knuckles scrapin' the ground. Wrai Ballard, the Musquite Kid, mighta been the fastest there ever was with a six-gun, but he never used it less'n another drew first. I was with Wrai Ballard when he got Robert Glenn Briggs, an' I want t'tell you that it was fair an' square....

Me an' Wrai Ballard, the Musquite Kid, had come up from Art Rapp's A-J spread to Twin Tendrils, a little trail town in the Panhandle, in search of women, likker, and poker. You can't call us True Fans. The Kid, he don't drink, says it interferes with his gunslingin', but every bar to me is like a national convention.

Art had told us that Dude Jawn Davis's Room 770 Saloon had the best bar and most poker in Twin Tendrils, so we reined up and shook the Texas sand outa our levis.

Wrai enters first, loosening his twin Colts out sheer habit. I notice the eyes of a tall, well-built blond with an amiable expression widen at the motion, an' he hastily whispers somethin' to a well-dressed hombre at the center Faro table.

The Kid winks at me as we cross the room, so I know he catches it too. I looks at the Finley nude above the bar and orders a drink while Wrai takes in the gambling layout.

I silps my Nuclear Fizz in the insurgent manner.

The Room 770 Saloon was a fair-sized place. Twin Tendrils lay right in the middle of the Chisholm Trail, an' cowhands ridin' herd from all over Texas made it a point t'have at least one drink to clear the trail dust from their throats before pushin' on up North. It was the only saloon of any size in Twin Tendrils, and the Dude's layout had more ways of partin' you from your poke than any place this side of the gold fields, whether you wanted Faro, roulette, chuckaluck, blackjack, women, or a complete set of Thrill Book.

"Feelin' lucky, Cyclone?" the Kid turns an' says to me right out loud.

"Why shore," I says right back, "but I'm dryer than Philly on a Sunday nite. Go ahead an' win enough to clear my thirst an' I'll be with you when the boat begins to rock."

"QX, Cyclone," agrees the Kid, noticin' the well-dressed hombre is walkin' over our way. "Check you to the usual number of decimals."

"Howdy, gents," says the well-dressed hombre.

Right away I spots him for Dude Jawm Davis. Art Rapp had told us how the Dude and his gunmen ran the town, so I knew the Dude would want t' know about the Kid an' me. I nudges Wrai and we turns around.

"Howdy, yoreself."

"Lemme buy yuh a drink," says the well-dressed hombre. "My name's Dude Jawm Davis, an' I own this place. Don't rec'lect seein' you gents 'round town afore."

"I don't drink," says the Kid politely. "Kinda interferes with my poker. My friend will have a Nuclear Fizz, tho, an' much obliged."

"Thanks, Dude," I chimes in. "I'm Cyclone Coswal, an' this young galoot with me is Wrai Ballard. We've been workin' on a spread down South fer so long we still have a mint copy of OOTWA. Figured it was time for a little relaxation."

I was lyin' an' I knew Dude thot I was lyin'. He didn't say nothin'. He has us spotted fer a pair o' driftin' guns an' I wasn't goin' t'change his opinion.

The bartender brought the drinks, an' we silps our Nuclear Fizzes in the insurgent manner. Wrai leans back against the bar, with his hands near his guns in case of any trouble.

"Yuh goin' t'be around fer any length of time?" says the Dude inquiringly.

"It all depends on our luck," says the Kid. "Our pokes are kinda light, an' them poker tables shore do look invitin'."

Dude smiles like a used prozine dealer facin' a completist. "If yuh hankers fer poker, stranger, this is the right place. There's an openin' at that there table."

He pointed to a corner table where the tall, well-built blond with an amiable expression was dealin' cards. "But we play a wide-open game here, Wrai. Wouldn't want a stranger to feel like we were layin' for him."

"Thanks for the warnin', Dude," says the Kid politely, "but I'm used to fast company." He didn't say nothin' 'bout playin' with SAPS at conventions. No use tippin' his hand.

"Think I'll stay at the bar," I puts in. Them Nuclear Fizzes taste mighty good, an' I kinda like the looks of that red-haired filly at the dice cage. Think I could buy her a drink, Dude?"

"Dunno why not, Cyclone," he agrees. "Irene is a right sociable girl. I'll tell her yore a friend of mine, and would like to meet her. Enjoy yoreselves, gents, an' see me if you want anythin'. I like yuh."

Dude wasn't foolin' me. He still thought we were a pair o' gunsels, an' he wasn't takin' any chances. If I knew the Dude's type, he'd tip off that tall, well-built blond with an amiable expression to take the Kid for his poke an' then offer us a job ridin' with his sidewinders. But I wasn't worried. The Musquite Kid could take care o' himself, an' that redhead was short and voluptuous. Yep, I was lookin' forward to meetin' Irene.

CHAPTER II

I was silpin' a Nuclear Fizz in the insurgent manner an' gettin' purty well acquainted with Irene, when I decides to mosey on over to the poker table myself. After a few drinks I like to play poker, too. I invites the redhead along fer luck.

"If I wins," I says conversationally, "you can have a blue chip necklace, Irene."

"That beats a FAPA Mailing," she murmurs, an' walks on over behind me. I nods to Davis at the Faro table and walks on over to Wrai.

"How we doin', Podner?" I asks, noticin' his stack is kinda low.

"Ain't complainin'," smiles the Kid. "These here gents play a mighty interestin' brand of poker. Ain't had so much fun since I wrote a Planet-type letter to Brass Tacks."

"Care to sit in?" asks the tall, well-built blond with an amiable expression. "Hand's open."

"Don't mind effen I do," I says, takin' out a few yellowbacks. "Guess you gents don't mind some paper in the game. They's on the Bank o' Texas."

"Bank o' Texas is jake with me," says the tall, well-built blond with the amiable expression, and the boys around the table do likewise. I slides into the vacant seat. Irene stands behind me, placing a Nuclear Fizz alongside.

I glances 'round the table. "I'm Cyclone Coswal," I says. "Me an' Wrai Ballard jist come in from down south. They make a right nice Nuclear Fizz in this hyar Room 770."

"Specialty of the house," says the blond. "I'm Aces Toth. Yore sittin' next to Slippery Shapiro, an' the gent across from yuh answers to Aussie Dard."

"I'm Racy Higgs," breaks in the last man at the table. Racy was a smooth-faced youngster who seemed outa place in a poker game with these varmints. Shucks, I woulda mistook him fer a serious and constructive fan anywheres else.

"Shore hopes yuh changes the game," continues Racy. "I ain't had a good hand since Marvel folded the first time."

"Shouldn't play poker less'n yuh can affords to lose," offers the Kid. "Reckon I'm learnin' the hard way, too."

"Deal the cards," says Aces, shovin' a deck my way. "This is gonna be my pot."

I deals a hand of draw, and Wrai opens with ten. Racy throws in his hand with a pout, an' Aces calls. Aussie raises ten and Shapiro calls. I looks at my cards and raises Aussie ten with three bullets.

"Guess you come in at the right time," observes Aces, droppin' out. The Kid folds, Aussie calls, and Shapiro throws in. I figgure Aussie fer two pair an' draws one to suck him in. Aussie didn't improve on the draw, tho, and checked, folding when I bet.

"Get us some Nuclear Fizzes," I tells Irene. I rakes in the pot and hands her a chip. "It looks like a good night."

Wrai was dealin' the next hand when this female comes in. Now I don't have anythin' agin females. They's nice in their place, smellin' o' that perfume an' in them silk dresses. But thisun smelt of horseflesh and carried a pair o' Colts low-slung on her hips. She looked like she could use 'em.

"So yore the one," she blasts, lookin' at the Kid with murder in her eyes. "You an' them no-count mavericks sittin' with yuh!"

The Kid looks kinda baffled an' says, "Me?"

"You!" repeats the female, with her hands near her Colts. "Takin' Cousin Racy in a crooked game of poker. Don't think you can get the ranch over a cold deck, even tho yore boss, Dude Jawn Davis, runs the rest o' Twin Tendrils."

"Why, ma'm," says Wrai, confused, jerkin' a thumb in my direction and makin' sure his hands are above the table, "I don't know what yore talkin' 'bout. Me 'n' Cyclone, here, jist drifted into town half an hour back."

"That's right, G.M.," speaks up the Dude. He's been sidlin' over while this hyar female been screamin' at the Kid. "I run a respectable place, here, an' anybody that wants to sit in on a game is okay. If Racy wants to play poker I can't stop him. Cold decks? Shucks, G.M., you're talkin' wilder'n a neofan at his first convention."

That made the female all the madder. "Y' can't sweet-talk me like you do Miss Nanshare. I ain't sweet and unspoiled like she is. Uncle Eney raised me to outride an' outshoot any man livin' an' don't you ferget it. Besides, I have a high-type mind. I have broad mental horizons. I think in cosmis concepts."

"Now lookee here," says Dude. "Le's go to my office'n have a little talk..."

But the female wasn't havin' any palaver. "Go read Science Fiction Plus," she sneers. "The only talk I want with you is over your grave on Boot Hill. Le's go, Racy."

She stalks outa the Room 770 Saloon, Cousin Racy at her heels.

Dude winks at Aces Toth, and comes over to the table. "Y'gotta excuse G.M., boys," he says. "She owns a small spread outside Twin Tendrils, an' she has the idee that I'd like to own it, too. Have a drink on me, an' le's play some poker."

Aces mutters somethin' 'bout havin' to attend to some business, and goes into a back room. Dude slides into his seat. "Reckon I can give you gents some action."

Wrai nods to me, an' I know what he's thinkin'; I think the same thing myself. "Thanks, Dude," I says, "but we gotta bed down our horses an' get a room. We'll be back purty soon."

"Don't be gone too long, honey," smiles Irene. "You still gotta win that blue chip necklace fer me. Them FAPA mailings won't keep me very warm at night."

We cashes in our chips, an' I stick my yellowbacks into my poke while we leave the saloon. "I 'low I know what business that Aces Toth is attendin' to," I mentions to Wrai.

"Seems like they don't 'preciate their womenfolk here," agrees the Kid. "I like G.M.'s spirit, an' I allus was partial to a gal what looks like she can handle a sixgun."

We forks our broncs on the road leading out of Twin Tendrils, puchin' 'em hard to overcome the lead of Racy an' G.M. If I knew Dude, that wink he gave Aces Toth was a signal to drygulch 'em, an' I agrees with the Kid when he said that G.M. was a right spirited filly. Sure enough, a couple o' miles outside o' town we hear the crack of a high-powered Sharps.

"Le's ride!" hollers Wrai.

CHAPTER III

They was pinned down behind some rocks in a small arroyo jist off the main trail. Aces was outa range of G.M.'s twin Colts, an' on top of a small hill. Every time G.M. or Racy would move, a slug from the Sharps would send 'em back to cover.

"I'll make like Superfan and circle around on Aces from behind," suggests the Kid. "Kinda keep him busy, huh?"

"QX," I agrees, "but get it over with fast. I'm feelin' dry again."

I wedges myself behind a big rock an' begins to pump lead at the hill, while Wrai rides off. After a while things quiet down an' I begin wishin' I'd brought a prozine with me, or at least Irene. Purty soon some shots come driftin' down from the hill, so I knows the Kid is havin' fun. A few minutes later, Ballard rides back with a big grin on his face.

"I chased him out okay," says the Kid, "but one look at that hoss o' his'n made me know it wasn't any sense to follow him back to town. Le's go see Cousin Racy an' G.M."

I gives the Kid a hurt look. "Down, Laney." I says. "Racy doesn't interest me at all, an' I don't like the way G.M. carries her iron."

"Back at the Room 770, G.M. mentioned another female," reminds Wrai. "Said Miss Nanshare was sweet an' unspoiled..."

"That's diff'runt," I says, rec'lecting. "Guess this Miss Nanshare can't be a stfanne. Le's go."

G.M. 'n' Racy were mountin' up when we arrived, Racy lookin' a little green. "Whatsa matter, Racy," I says jokingly, "Did yuh trade a set of Unknown fer some Shaver Amazings?"

That G.M. don't have no sense of humor. "Watch yore lip, stranger," she rasps. "Cousin Racy cain't help it if he's young. Uncle Eney allus kept him away from varmints like you."

"Why shucks, ma'm," puts in the Kid hastily, "Coswal don't mean no offense. He drinks, you know."

"Well, effen he keeps goin' 'round makin' such remarks, he'll get his haid blowed off." Her expression relaxed a little. "Thanks fer takin' that sidewinder offen our necks."

"Kinda thot that Davis was a no good hombre," says Wrai. "After you and Racy left the Room 770, we saw Dude give Aces Toth the sign t' drygulch yuh."

"Shoulda expected that," G.M. says wearily. "You boys got us out of a tight spot; reckon the least we can do is give yuh an invite to our spread fer dinner. Yuh looks like yuh could use a good meal."

That was okay with me. We hadn't et good since we pushed up north, an' I shore could use some spaghetti an' chocolate milk. "Much obliged," I says, and the Kid nods his head.

G.M.'s ranch lay a few miles off of the main trail, an' we have quite a talk on the way out. Seems like Dude Jawn Davis been buyin' up all the land 'round Twin Tendrils 'cos of a railroad what was comin' thru. If he couldn't buy the land, he'd buy up the deeds from the Twin Tendrils bank an' foreclose. Anybody gettin' in his way would meet with a fatal accident.

"That's what happened to us," says G.M. "Uncle Eney was one of the first people that come to Twin Tendrils after the War. He built up the spread to a right nice piece of property, too. An' when he wouldn't sell out to Dude Jawn Davis, he was shot down in a fake gunfight. Racy and Miss Nanshare was back East at school when it happened, but I never had no use fer book-larnin'.

"Uncle Eney left the ranch divided among the three of us: me, Racy an' Miss Nanshare. But he left me in charge, an' I got to approve of any dealin's the others make to get rid of their sections. I been out on the range since I was born, an' I ain't goin' t'let any city dude take over."

"Yore absolutely right, G.M.," agrees the Kid. "I digs you the most."

As we ride into the ranch, I notice a peculiar-lookin' sign hangin' from the fence. "Nice lookin' brand," I remarks. "The Bar A. But how come that bar is above the 'A' 'steada 'longside?"

"This is the Null-A spread, stranger," says G.M. witheringly. "Uncle Eney got the idee outa one of them pulp magazines he was allus reading. I never went fer that crazy Buck Rogers stuff, myself."

"Never read that crazy Buck Rogers stuff either," I agrees. "But that still looks like a right int'rustin' brand."

We dismounts at the ranch house an' G.M. gets the horses taken care of. "You gents lookin' fer a job?" she asks.

"Never did like to work, ma'm," I puts in. "I allus wanted to be a professional writer."

The Kid gives me a look an' says, "Why, thankee, G.M., but me an Cyclone ain't cow-pokes. We're jist a couple of saddle tramps who stopped into the 770 fer some poker. We was plannin' on ridin' outa town in the mornin'."

"Sprlfsk, fardle and fump," curses G.M., lookin' at them irons of Wrai's. "Don't be coy with me, Ballard. I ain't a neofan like that Dude Jawn Davis in Twin Tendrils. You keep yore hands too near them guns. I'm expectin' a heap o' trouble 'round hyar, an' I needs yore help. I..."

She was interrupted by a purty young gal who comes outa the ranchouse. "G.M.," the young gal says, all flustered-like, "Dude Jawn Davis prefers women to cars. Ain't it wonderful? He..."

"Shet yore mouth, Miss Nanshare," snaps G.M. "Dude Jawn Davis don't care nothin'

'bout you. He's jist out t'get yore share of the ranch. Now go 'long an' tell the cook to fix us up a big batch o' spaghetti and chocolate milk. We're hongry."

"I'm Cyclone Coswal," I says hastily. "My sidekick is Wrai Ballard. You look purtier than a mint Clayton Astounding, Miss Nanshare."

She blushes nicely, and goes back into the house, with Racy an' G.M. followin' her. "Good thing you said you don't read that crazy Buck Rogers stuff," whispers Wrai. "Remember, sex and stf don't mix..."

"Hope you don't mind effen I keeps my guns on, G.M.," says the Kid after we gets inside. "Without 'em I feel like a fan without his beanie."

She didn't mind. She allus wore hers around the house now, with Dude Jawn Davis feelin' like he did. All thru dinner I kept noticin' how purty Miss Nanshare was, an' wishin' I could talk to her about Heinlein versus Bradbury. After we et, we had a round of Nuclear Fizzes an' G.M. silps hers in the insurgent manner jist like a man. I's glad I wasn't Dude Jawn Davis. I wouldn't want that female on my neck.

"Well," says Wrai, "shore do 'preciate that fine meal, G.M." He gave a long sigh. Spaghetti and chocolate milk were allus the Kid's favorite food. "Bur Cyclone an' me better be movin' 'long. We got a mite of ridin' to do afore sundown."

"Shucks, Wrai," I says, lookin' at Miss Nanshare, "reckon we could hang 'round town a couple o' days. This Null-A looks like a right nice spread, an' I don't trust that Davis critter nohow. Besides..."

"Is it really true?" Miss Nanshare interrupts. "Did Dude Jawn Davis really try to drygulch Cousin Racy an' G.M.?"

"'Fraid so, ma'm," says Wrai. "He tells Cyclone an' me he's not int'rusted in the ranch, but I've seen his kind afore. G.M. says there's a railroad commin' thru Twin Tendrils purty soon, an' Davis gotta get the Null-A afore that happens."

Miss Nanshare doesn't look happy, and her lower lip trembles. "Guess Dude Jawn Davis prefers cars to women after all," she quavers.

"Bet he's a True Fan," I remarks.

I was goin' t'say somethin' else, when a shot comes thru the window as close to me as a third tendril. I falls down on the floor, but G.M. already has her guns blazin' out the door.

"That does it!" she snarls. "That really ties it. I'm goin' into town and get that Dude Jawn Davis. First he tries tuh drygulch me, an' then he tries to gun me down in my own house. I'll show him that..."

Wrai Ballard, the Musquite Kid, was all serious and constructive now. He'd allus thot a man what tries to shoot another down without a chance is worse than a fake fan. "That's jist what the Dude is plannin' on," he says. "He's hopin' that you'll be so mad, you'll jist saddle up and head on into town. I 'low a few of his boys are waitin' somewheres 'long the trail, an' when you pass 'em..."

"Reckon yore right," says G.M. grudgingly. "What you think I should do?"

"Why not sell him the ranch, Cousin?" squeeks Racy. "I'm too young to die. I haven't finished the latest serial in Galaxy. I gotta live long enough to finish that serial; I jist gotta." His voice became excited and ended up in an obscene gurgle.

I tries to console him a mite and gives Miss Nanshare a friendly leer. "Nothin's goin' t'happen to you folks. You got Cyclone Coswal an' Wrai Ballard, the Musquite Kid, on yore side, an' them odds is too big for even Dude Jawm Davis an' his hired gunfighters to buck. What we gonna do, Wrai?"

The Kid didn't hesitate. "Check yore iron, Cyclone; we're goin' into town an' have a leetle talk with Dude Jawm Davis."

CHAPTER IV

G.M. wanted to ride into town with us, but Wrai talks her out of it. She wasn't very happy about lettin' a mere man take on her troubles. I says a few words to Miss Nanshare an' Racy settles down to read his serial.

We don't take the main trail back Twin Tendrils way. We figgers jist like we tells G.M. -- Dude Jawm Davis has a reception party waitin' an' we don't like them kind o' parties. 'Stead, we hightails it thru Crifanac Gap. We knows Crifanac Gap is Injun territory, but the Kid is blood brother to Chief EdCo, an' we don't count on his botherin' us none.

Leetle ways from the Null-A we runs into trouble, namely a huntin' party o' the Crifanac tribe. They outnumber us an' there wasn't nothin' we could do 'ceptin' let ourselves be taken afore Chief EdCo. These ypung braves are allus headstrong; they'd like our scalps, an' their leader, Bergeron-of-the-Stylish-Stencil, never did like the Kid.

We were taken to the tribal village. "Beer is the only true ghod," greets Chief EdCo.

"Great are the glories of Beer," replies the Kid in keepin' with Crifanac custom, "but why has my brother brought his friend before the council fires of the Crifanac tribe? Is the land of the Crifanac closed to the Musquite Kid, blood brother to Chief EdCo, mighty fan?"

Chief EdCo's face was grave. "The deeds and honor of my brother are known to me," he says, "but my braves grow restless. There are words of the iron horse entering our hunting ground. The winds sing of a Great White Father from far off lands who will bring flame-sticks among the Crifanac people unless they leave the land of their fathers and their fathers' fathers. The man whom you know as Dude Jawm Davis has told me this."

"Dude Jawm Davis is a white-eye to be trusted," puts in Bergeron-of-the-Stylish-Stencil. "He prefers cars to squaws. He gives me egoboo."

Ballard looks at the hostile faces around him and gives me a worried look. Every minute we stay here puts the Null-A in greater danger. If he says the wrong thing, we gets in trouble. Chief EdCo was our friend, but Bergeron-of-the-Stylish-Stencil has a strong followin'. If formal council was held, mebbe the Chief would be outvoted. Injuns are parculiar critters; almost as parculiar as members of the N3F.

The Kid takes a deep breath an' his voice thunders thru the village. "Hear me, my brother, and hear me, o mighty warriors of the Crifanac people. Bergeron-of-the-Stylish-Stencil does indeed deserve egoboo. He has already achieved the noble stature of the departed Kroll and Grossman. But Dude Jawm Davis speaks with a forked tongue. His words mock the memory of your fathers and your fathers' fathers. He is a fighter of women. He does not believe that Beer is the only true ghod."

"Would Ballard speak such words in the presence of Dude Jawm Davis?# asks Bergeron-of-the-Stylish-Stencil suspiciously.

"My words are as straight as the zapguns of the Crifanac tribe," says the Kid haughtily. "Is the blood brother of your Chief one to be distrusted and unbelieved? Would you stripe your faces with ketchup after you have finished your filet mignon and ride off to war because of a man like Dude Jawm Davis? I have seen these things with my own eyes. I say they are true."

"Wrai Ballard lies!" Anderson-of-the-Purple-Hands, one of Bergeron's supporters, came before the fire. "Dude Jawm Davis prefers cars to women. He would not speak with a forked tongue."

I began to think that members of the Crifanac tribe were True Fans.

The Kid's in a terrible sitiation. He c'n talk as smooth as a convention auctioneer, but it ain't goin' t'do him any good less'n the tribe believes him. Bergeron-of-the-Stylish-Stencil whispers somethin' to Chief EdCo, and the Chief nods solemnly.

A hand was raised in final judgement. "The ghods will decide!"

CHAPTER V

I breathes a sigh of relief, 'cos we win. I'd seen this hyar Injun ceremony afore. Members of the Crifanac tribe believes Beer is the only true ghod, so natchurly the hombre that drinks the most beer is Chief.

If a coupla parties argue a mite, they go into the Temple of Beer and drink 'til only one remains on his feet. The galoot that stays on his feet is the victor since he worshipped the great ghod Beer the most. I wasn't worried. Shucks, I been to several national conventions.

Chief EdCo, as head of the Crifanac tribe, did the drinking for the Injuns. I follows him into the Temple, licking my lips. Don't get free Beer very often. Sometimes I like Beer better'n Nuclear Fizzes.

I figures the Chief is goot fer at least ten gallons, but he surprizes me and holds up after fifteen. "Hurry up an' finish him off," whispers Wrai. "No tellin' how long the Dude'll hold off afore he goes to the Null-A agin."

"Shucks, Wrai," I whispers back between gulps, "wish we had more time. This Beer tastes mighty good." But I make like I'm Frank Kerkhof, and Chief EdCo can't keep up with me. He passes out, an' I swallows dryly as they take the remaining Beer back to the Sacred Place of Beer.

"Beer is the only true ghod," speaks up Bergeron-of-the-Stylish-Stencil, his voice trembling in awe. "He has made his wishes known to us. Ride in peace, for ye are the Chosen Ones of Beer."

Our horses are brung to us an' we mounts up an' gets outa there fast. I only hopes I don't have to stop too often along the way. Beer doesn't stay with me too long.

"Next stop, the Room 770," says Wrai. "Le's ride!"

It was dark when we arrives in Twin Tendrils. We hitches our hosses in front of Jacobs's General Store, down the road a piece from the Room 770 Saloon. No sense tippin' off our hand. Wrai decides to go in there fust, with me driftin' 'round in case anybody tries to gets him from behind. Varmints like Dude Jawm Davis allus spots a man outa sight as extra insurance in a fight, an' me an' the Kid takes no chances.

"Got everythin' straight?" asks the Kid.

"QX," I says. "When you makes yore play, I'll be with yuh."

We loosens our guns an' starts walkin' up the street, Wrai with that little grin o' his'n that he allus wears when he aims t'do some shootin'. A little ways from the Room 770 Saloon I sees that tall, well-built blond with an amiable expression, Aces Toth, gettin' ready to mount his hoss. He spots us, too, but instead of haulin' out his hoglaig, he comes over to us like a neofan to a newstand.

"Reach for your gunbelt an' yore a dead man," drawls the Kid.

"Than Roscoe I found you," says Aces, not actin' scared at all. "Now lissen, 'cos I don't have much time. My name's no more Aces Toth than HanKuttner is Jack Vance. I'm U.S. Marshal Robert Glenn Briggs."

"What's a U.S. Marshal doin' with Dude Jawn Davis?" I inquires. "That combination's 'bout as likely as a insurgent goin' to a convention for the formal program."

"The Federal Government received a tip that Dude Jawn Davis was behind some outlawin' that'd been goin' on in these parts," goes on Aces Toth, or Robert Glenn Briggs as he calls hisself. "I was assigned to investigate. I jined up with his gang t'collect evidence. I knew you was Wrai Ballard, the Musquite Kid, when you walks into the Room 770, but I tells the Dude you is jist a drifter that I saw in San Antone. Shucks, when Davis tells me to drygulch G.M. an' Cousin Racy, I hadta make it look good; coupla Dude's varmints were followin' me a half mile back or so, an' I wasn't ready to make my play. Course, yore showin' up helped me out, an' I rides back into town with them hombres, complainin' how you an' yore sidekick run me out. But now I got all the proof I need."

"Reckon he could be tellin' the truth, Cyclone?" the Kid asks me.

"A shot made up our minds. It got Robert Glenn Briggs in the back. We pumps some lead into the shadows but didn't hit nothin'. Briggs wasn't dead, but I could see no sense in gettin' a pill roller. He wouldn't last very long.

"Credentials an' evidence inside my shirt," he gasps. "Coupla deputy badges in my pocket. Take my hoss, Wrai, an' get Dude Jawn Davis." He swears us in an' dies, a brave man workin' fer his country.

"Least I can do is name that hoss after him,W says Wrai, respectfully. "Robert Glenn Briggs seems like a right funny name fer a hoss, but it's fittin'. That's a pow'ful hoss, an' Robert Glenn Briggs was a pow'ful man."

"That he was," I agrees. "But now, Special Deputy United States Marshal Wrai Ballard, le's clean out them mangy horny toads. I wanna get back to the Null-A spread an' talk with Miss Nanshare."

"Goshwowboyoboy," remarks the Kid.

Somethin' been botherin' me. Iffen a man been gunned down in any other town, lotsa people'd come out on the street. But hyar in Twin Tendrils nothin' happened. I don't like that one bit. Reckon Dude Jawn Davis expected gunplay an' warned the town to stay off the street. Right now I suspicioned he had 'bout twenty rifles trained on us in case we tries anythin'. He could blast us down in our tracks, but mebbe we was waitin' 'til we walked in the Room 770 where he could make it more legal.

The Kid was one jump ahead of me. "Get yore hoss an' le's ride outa town real peaceful," he whispers. "I got me an idee."

Don't think I takes a breath 'til we gets outa town. Any minute, I expects a bullet in the back, but Dude Jawm Davis doesn't make his move.

"What's up, Wrai?" I asks.

"Lissen, Cyclone," the Kid says, real earnest-like, "since you won the Ceremony of the great ghod Beer back in Crifanac Gap, them Injuns would do almost anythin' you ask 'em to. Yore big medicine to them, the Chosen One of Beer."

"Warn't nothin'," I says modestly.

He gives me a knowing grin. "There's no sense o' you an' me takin' on Twin Tendrils alone. Effen we tries to get Dude Jawm Davis an' his mob by ourselves, we won't stand a chance. But effen we rode in at the head of a bunch of Injuns..."

"Say no mo', Daddy-o," I interrupts. "You are the swingin'est, an' I got eyes. I'll fall in at their crazy pad an' modulate back in cut time with a bunch o' real wild cats."

The Kid nods. "Meantime, I'll mosey on over to the ranch an' let G.M. know what's goin' on. Wouldn't want her ridin' into town an' gettin' her head blown off. Meet you at sunup."

I waves my hand and heads in the direction of Crifanac Gap while the Kid rides to the Null-A spread. Yessir, that Dude Jawm Davis is goin' t'get a real surprise long 'bout sunup.

CHAPTER VI

Chief EdCo hisself volunteered to lead his people into Twin Tendrils. "You are the Chosen One of Beer," he says ceremoniously. "Beer is the only true ghod."

"Chief EdCo of Crifanac is indeed a noble chief," I shoots right back. "Have your braves streak their faces with ketchup after they have finished their filet mignon, as tho they ride along the path of war. Dude Jawm Davis would not dare play false with you and your people."

Chief EdCo nods. "Your mind is as swift as the neofan's mimeo. Great are the glories of Beer."

"Great are the glories of Beer," I reply, noticin' my throat is feelin' dry. "But we must be at the meeting place before the sunghod makes his presence known."

A couple o' the younger braves grumbled at bein' made to leave their tents and fanzines jist to ride to Twin Tendrils with a white-eye, but they remember the way I drunk Beer an' went. I rides outa Crifanac Gap at the head o' three hundred Injuns covered with warpaint. I 'low that Dude Jawm Davis wouldn't try to gun down the Kid an' me now.

Wrai was waitin' at the meetin' place when the Injuns an I arrived. The sun was jist peekin' over the mountains. I notice G.M. with him, a grim look on her face.

"Couldn't get this female to stay at the Null-A..." he begins.

G.M. interrupts him. "Dude Jawn Davis had Uncle Eney killed. I'm goin' to get that varmint myself, an' you keep yore guns off'n him."

The Kid an' I looks at each other helplessly, an' we starts fer Twin Tendrils with G.M. an' the Injuns trailin' behind us. We go in slow an' easy; Chief EdCo has his braves surround the town, an' ten of 'em ride in with G.M., me an' the Kid. We stops in front of the Room 770 Saloon an' dismounts.

"Come outa thar with yore hands up," yells the Kid. "Yore under arrest, Dude Jawn Davis. The town's surrounded an' I'm Special Deputy United States Marshal Wrai Ballard."

Davis comes outa the Room 770 Saloon emptyhanded. "Why, Wrai," he grins, "I don't know what yore talkin' 'bout. I jist run a saloon in this town. You been lissenin' tuh G.M. too long."

G.M. was itchin' tuh draw, but I was keepin' an eye on her.

"Then you won't have no objection to ridin' down tuh San Antone fer trial," says the Kid. "Leastwise, reckon you don't effen yuh ain't done nothin'."

"I got no objection," says the Dude, still grinnin'. "But it'd be kinda inconvenient fer me right now. Suppose we go in the saloon an' palaver a mite. We could work some-
thin' out that'd be profitable to all of us."

"Thanks, Dude," I says, "but the Kid an' me have other plans. Mount up and le's go."

"The grin goes off Dude's face," notices G.M.

"Yore makin' a mistake, Ballard..." begins Dude Jawn Davis.

"Wrai Ballard, the Musquite Kid," I corrects. "Blood brother to Chief EdCo of the Crifanac Nation an' the fastest slinger in the West. Don't try nothin'."

"Guess there's nothin' I can do," the Dude says quietly. "Reckon we might as well start fer San Antone."

I didn't like it; it was too easy. Dude Jawn Davis wasn't the type o' rattler t'let himself be taken away without puttin' up a fight. But the Kid was watchin' him real careful-like, an' them Injuns could come into town anytime, in case his boys started any ruckus.

We left town real quiet. Chief EdCo took his braves back to the Crifanac village, an' G.M. finally left fer the Null-A when Wrai tells her that he got enough evidence on Dude Jawn Davis to hang him in three reincarnations. "Tell Miss Nanshare I'll be back," I yells after her. "I still wants to talk to her about Heinlein versus Bradbury."

We rides along a couple hours, Dude not makin' a move an' bein' real quiet. "We'll water our hosses on the other side of Filk Song Canyon," says the Kid, an' Dude jist grins.

We soon find out why he's grinnin'. Half way thru Filk Song Canyon, a shot knocks the Kid outa his saddle. Another catches my hoss, an' I find myself pumpin' lead at Dude's back. It does no good. He vanishes up into the hills with the rest of his boys.

Wrai wasn't out. A slug got him in the shoulder, but he'd be okay effen he didn't lose too much blood. We went behind some rocks, not takin' any chances. Dude Jawn Davis would blast us if we didn't have no cover. I takes a stick an' holds my hat up in the open, an' shore 'nuff, some iron opens up across the way.

His shoulder hurts him, but Wrai manages a grin. "Reckon we don't think too clear, Cyclone. How many bullets you got left?"

I checked when I finished reloading my Colt. "Only eight, Wrai. How 'bout you?"

"I got ten. They won't last too long effen Dude Jawn Davis an' his boys decide to rush us."

"Looks like they might be decidin' now," I says, noticin' everythin' is silent.

"They gotta do it afore sundown," agrees the Kid, "otherwise we'll be able to get away in the dark."

"Don't think that shoulder will wait 'til sundown, Wrai." I was silent a while, tryin' tuh figger somethin' out. We was trapped like a collector at the auction, but I wasn't givin' up as long as I was alive.

I didn't keep quiet too long. Six-guns begin blazin' an' I reckoned they'd be makin' a move any time.

They did.

Everythin' went so fast, I'm not sure what 'xactly did happen. The Kid an' me were waitin' 'til they got real close to us, so we could make every shot count, when real sudden-like a whole bunch o' Injuns dropped 'em in their tracks. Dude Jawn Davis tried to get away thru the Canyon, but G.M. got him in the back jist like he'd got her Uncle Eney. The hull thing didn't take longer'n Kerkhof silpin' a Nuclear Fizz in the insurgent manner.

We comes out from behind the rock, Wrai holdin' his wounded shoulder, an' me wavin' my arms like a SAPS member who seen his name in print. "You okay?" asks G.M. "Good thing I gets Chief EdCo an' his braves, an' we follow 'long. Reckoned you might run into trouble."

"Sure," says Wrai. "I feel as good as a fan after the third day of a convention." Then he promptly falls on his face.

Yep, Wrai Ballard, the Musquite Kid, was the fastest slinger of 'em all afore he hung up his guns. His shoulder mended after a spell at the Null-A spread, an' we went on ridin' jist like afore.

Seems like there was some son in every town that would mistake that star-begotten look o' Wrai's for that of a Shaver fan an' would start in crowdin'. Shucks, there wouldn't be anythin' Wrai could do 'ceptin' give him a third eye with Judge Colt. Don't think me an' the Kid ever stayed in one place longer'n it'd take a neofan to put out a subzine.

But the Kid didn't mind. He'd jist saddle up Robert Glenn Briggs an' we'd ride to a different town. The Kid was as good at cards as he was with a six-gun, so we allus had a well-filled poke. He'd been goin' to conventions fer years.

Nobody knew where Wrai Ballard come from, not even me, an' I rec'lect I knew him better'n anybody else. When I asks the Kid, he'd jist smile shyly and toss me the latest SAPS mailing. Kinda secretive the Kid was. Heered he learned to shoot defendin' his Argosy an' Blue Book collections agin' renegade Injuns, but I paid no mind to it. All sortsa stories circulate 'bout a slinger as fast as Wrai Ballard, the Musquite Kid.

"Six-Gun Serenade" was originally published for the
26th mailing of the Spectator Amateur Press Society,
December 1953.

* * * * *

Introducing: The Ballard Chronicles

In every generation there is a great big man.

This great big man may seemingly appear to be one of us mere, mortal mortals. His fanzines are not necessarily superior to our best efforts, although they are definitely better. His fannish accomplishments, while better than ours, are only just so. But he is definitely above us, Fannus Superior. He is a great big man...or Fan.

Clearly, we have such a Fan in our midst.

We are privileged to have Wrai Ballard in our organization!

Many tales, credible and logical tales, are circulated about Wrai Ballard. But these tales are only part of the Ballard legend. Clearly, with such an august personage (or fan) it is not enough.

Thus, the Ballard Chronicles.

The first of the Ballard Chronicles, "The Spectacular SAPS Caper," featuring Wrai Ballard, Private Eye, was written in approximately ten hours in order to meet last mailing's deadline. Black didn't include it in the last mailing, possibly because he was killed in the first chapter. Possibly also because it arrived one or two days too late.

It was stencilled in the main by a non-fan, with ideas of her own about punctuation and spelling. As for myself, I can spell much better than Max Keasler, but my tripewriting is awful. Can't you tell?

Such errors in stencilling will be rectified in the future, I hope. However, that is not a promise. But I do hope I'll start writing the stories early enough to allow for such things as plotting and characterization.

As announced in the present issue of the Ballard Chronicles, the next issue will feature Cacti Wrai Ballard, the Mesquite Kid, in a thrilling saga of the old West, "Six-Gun Serenade." Prospective adventures deal with Wrai d'Ballard, the Fifth Musketeer, Wrai abd Ballard, Sheik of Sheiks, Black-Hearted Ballard, Scourge of the Spanish Main, and other similar topics.

I hope that you stay with me. You'll be used as a character yourself, you know. A fan is only a BNF after his name has been used in fan fiction.

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Spectator Amateur Press Society, June, 1953.