

HONK HONK,
MY DARLING

A
REX KOKO,
PRIVATE CLOWN
MYSTERY

BY JAMES FINN GARNER

**Brought to you by Suddsy Soap,
The Clean Soap in the Handy Paste.**

**Dedicated to Pat Byrnes, Dan Shea & Jordan Polansky,
when the rehearsals were more fun than the performances,**

**And 'til it's all out and over,
to Lies.**

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***“To be up on the wire is to live.
Everything else is just waiting.”***

--Karl Wallenda

“Damn everything, but the circus.”

--e. e. cummings

CHAPTER 1

DEALING FROM THE BOTTOM

When world-renowned flier Reynaldo Carlozo began whacking the soles of my feet, I was having a nice roll in the hay. If only I hadn't been there by my lonesome, something worthwhile might've come from this whole larry. As it was, this was just another rude awakening in a dingy locale.

"Koko! Koko!" he barked. "Come on, wake up! Get out of there!"

When he was up, working the trapeze, Carlozo was the epitome of control, strength and grace, a fearless deity in a spangly leotard, Icarus' younger, better-looking brother. The King of the Air, he was billed. Any other time than up, he was a mean, arrogant kinker with a brushfire temper and a talent for aggravation. If you're curious, the last time he flew in a show was five years ago.

"What th' hell's goin' on? Let a clown sleep, f'r chrissake." Waking up was going to be grueling whenever I did it today, but my hangover was quite capable of doing its job without anybody's help. You think your mouth is dry the morning after? See how it feels after sleeping all night in an elephant stall.

"Get up, get up! We need to talk!" he barked, hitting me on the feet again with the handle of a rake.

"Go away, Carlozo," I muttered. "I got no business with you." I curled up and rolled over, pulling a handful of hay up to my chin like a comfy quilt.

His voice was a mix of scorn and challenge. “You have sunk lower than I imagined possible. Filthy, haggard. How do you look at yourself in the mirror in the morning?”

“Simple. I sleep til noon. Now that you know my secret, hit the road and let me get on with my beauty regimen.”

When he didn’t reply, I closed my eyes and tried to quiet my agitated brain. I had just relaxed enough to doze off again, when a torrent of icy water hit me and shrank my skin as tight as a guy wire. “Hey, that bucket was my breakfast!” I jumped up, ready to box him on the ear hole a few times.

“Then here, dig in,” he said and threw it at my midsection, knocking the wind out of me. A good thing, too: while time had forced Carlozo to start dying his hair and mustache the color of tar, I could see through his creamy satin shirt that his barrel chest and muscles were still hard as a sack of rocks. He could’ve pounded me into hash with biscuits on the side, but instead he did something worse: he made me do calisthenics. “Now pep up. Let’s go. Hup hup. Start with jumping jacks.”

Still dripping and addle-brained, I did as I was told and waved my arms like a chicken trying to surrender. “What time is it anyway?”

“Six a.m. Best hour of the morning. I refuse to be associated with someone who would waste the day like you were doing. Now, side stretches, left five times, right five times, here we go.” As I tried lifting my hand over my head, it felt like a hostler’s whip had caught me in the armpit. Carlozo cared nanty for my cry of pain. “Don’t be a baby, you’ll thank me for this later.”

“Not if you don’t give me the chance to write my will,” I moaned. “And what do you mean, ‘associate with me’?”

“I need you to find someone for me,” he said in a brisk tone. “Now, squat thrusts.”

“Bah, impossible.”

“You must do this job for me, I insist!”

“I’m not talking about that,” I said. “Squat thrusts in these shoes?”

“You clowns and your ridiculous feet. All right then, windmills.” We began flapping our arms.

“So, you need a detective. If you want to hire me, come back during office hours.”

“Oh, and when is that?”

“Phone my office and find out.”

“You have a phone?”

Despite the urge to throw up, I said, “Workin’ on it.”

“And while you ‘work on it’,” he mocked, “you operate out of this stable? The great Rex Koko, sleeping in a barn like an animal from the menagerie.”

“It’s not so bad,” I said. “Daisy tried to turn this into a hothouse for growing orchids, but her visitors kept eating them.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Carlozo said, “although the fresh greens might do you good. Pasty skin, stringy hair, flab everywhere...I shudder to think what you might be eating. Awful.”

“Offal?”

“You agree?”

“Not with offal,” I said.

“It’s not awful?”

“Hell, it’s terrible.”

“Roots and beef blood,” he said with conviction.

“Hey, I’m the guy who should be cursing here, Carlozo.”

“What are you talking about? Now, run in place, hup hup. That’s the best diet in the world: root vegetables and beef blood. Everything you need. Every day, roots and blood. If you’d watched your diet, you wouldn’t be in agony now.”

“No, if I’d locked my door, I wouldn’t be....Aaaah! Oww!”

“This is just running in place! How hard can it be? Swing your arms a bit, pick your knees up...”

“Anything else?” I panted sarcastically.

He thought a moment. “Yes. You’re not perspiring enough. Don’t hold back, let yourself go.”

“That’s what I’d been doing,” I protested, “and you showed up... and ruined it.”

Carlozo snorted at me. “Your status is unique here in Top Town. Bottom of the ladder. Lowest of the low. A shambling memento mori.....”

“Listen, smooth talker, I’m flopping...in Daisy’s stall... while she visits relatives in Florida. Don’t let... your dirty mind... make this something...it’s not.”

“Rumors fly around you like the flies in this stall,” Carlozo prodded further. “And not just about the elephant, either. I want you for this job, Koko, because everyone hates you.”

“I’m dying... from the irony,” I gasped as the sweat poured down my ‘paint. I was feeling pain in parts of my body I was sure I’d sold for pin money long ago. “What ... where... who....?”

He finally stopped, his hands on his hips, his heels planted firmly together. “I need you to find my wife, Adeline. She’s missing.”

Bent over double, I wheezed for air like a ’25 Duesenburg. “Boots, missing? Next y’gonna tell me... the world revolves...around the sun?”

He glowered at me under his bushy, graying eyebrows. “I don’t like the insinuation.”

“Then you shouldn’t have married it,” I said. I might have been more diplomatic if I weren’t in such pain, but I doubt it. “She gives you the air more often than a tire pump, then she always comes back. Just sit tight and leave your trailer unlocked, Bo Peep.”

Carlozo clenched his jaw, making his mustache fidget. “I feel that will not work this time.”

“Then why drag me into your mess?”

“Are you always so difficult with the people who want to hire you?” he asked.

“Probably not,” I answered, “but some people make it easy. Go find her yourself.”

“NO!” he yelled forcefully. “I am Reynaldo Carlozo! I will not be humiliated again. She is mine, and I want her back. And she needs to feel shame for what she has done to me, paraded through the streets and brought home where she belongs....”

“All right, all right, I get your point, but I still don’t...”

“Enough of this. You will be the one to bring her back. I will pay you \$100 for the job. Here is ten to start.”

He took out his roll and peeled off two Lincolns. He tossed them at me disdainfully, but I managed to catch them in midair. At least some of my reflexes were still intact. Ten bucks doesn't buy what it used to, except maybe the services of a broken-down joey who owes money to the moths in his grouchbag. “Okay, I'll do it. You've bought yourself a bird-dog.”

Carlozo looked satisfied but not pleased. My taking the job may have validated his crummy opinion of me, but he was more saddened than satisfied. He was probably feeling sorry for himself that his personal situation had degenerated into this. The poor, misunderstood, tyrannical cuckold.

He raised his chin and explained, “I want you to bring her back so I can kill her.”

CHAPTER 2

STRIP POKER

Waving said his piece, Carlozo styled, spun on his heel and walked out.

Aching, sweaty and winded, I did a dead-drop backwards onto the hay. I'd taken a few beatings in my time, but this little exercise session was up there with the worst. At least I had some fold for my troubles. Now, my pounding head was asking, why did he want me to find his wife again?

Oh. Right. Well, maybe that was the turnips talking.

I pulled myself up eventually and began to collect my appurtenances. Daisy kept a neat and inviting stall, but it was time to move on. I didn't want her rep smeared when the other elephants on Bull Row began to gossip, which they were probably already doing. I dumped what few things I had into my keister, locked it shut, and pulled it out into the street. In the morning sunlight colored with amber, I set the trunk on the curb and sat on it. I lit the last cigarette I'd mooched the night before, trying to figure out a next step that seemed worth taking.

Top Town was quiet at that hour, and Bull Row was in a quiet part of Top Town; the elephants commanded that much respect, so they got the prime real estate. About the only sound I could hear was the swish-swish of the bulls as they ate their breakfast. Their stalls looked clean and orderly from where I sat, freshly painted and lined up like rowhouses, with carved and gilded name plates hanging over each door. I'm sure a few were peering at me from inside as I sat there getting used to the freshness of the

morning. Let 'em gawk, I didn't care. My hide had grown as thick as any pachyderm's over the past couple years.

I sat there in my sticky sweat, covered with chaff and hay like a dropped sucker. Despite the lingering agony in my body, I realized I owed a thank you to Carlozo. It's hard enough making a living as a detective, but it didn't help things to drop out of sight like I'd been doing. I'd tried to drink myself into obscurity, but I'm an inept drunk. I'm more likely to choke on a swizzle stick than die of cirrhosis. Maybe Carlozo's visit was timely, a blind-side slap to jolt me out of this mopery. Leave the exile act to Napoleon. A clown needs people, even when those people hate him.

If I was going to rejoin Top Town and mingle in not-so-polite company again, the first order of business was a nice boil-up. The next question was where to get it. Some joey in Clown Alley would probably be willing to lend me water and soap, but I didn't want to go over there just yet. Those guys are pals who've seen me at my worst and put up with a lot of grief defending my name when I didn't deserve it. I owed them something more like a grand entrance, clean, shaved and silly. I stood up and began to drag my battered keister, with one other long-lost friend in mind.

Past Bull Row, the dusty streets were beginning to show signs of life, however slowly. At that moment Top Town and I shared something, a certain morning-after feeling of cheap hooch, too many cigarettes, and a hazy recollection of small favors and large regrets. This neglected corner of the city of Spaulding proper is packed with performers, troupers and hangers-on who've left the show, or had the show leave them. There were reasons aplenty for this—a bad injury, slowing reflexes, a loss of nerve, a battle with the bottle. Still, a lot of people around here keep working and practicing,

dreaming of the day Big Bertha will give them that call, telling them to report to Sarasota to prep for next year's show. Whether this was from pluck or resilience or pure stupidity, I couldn't tell you. In circus folk, it's usually impossible to distinguish among those anyway.

Maybe the touring companies can turn up their noses, but the city here can't do without us. We provide Spaulding with diversions and spectacle every night of the week, a permanent midway, freak show and menagerie for their amusement and edification. Sailors and college boys come down to check out the exotic dancers, gawkers dawdle to stare at the freaks, young lovers stroll the midway and maybe win a stuffed animal at the shooting gallery. After the thrills, the drinks and the fights are over, all those elmers head home to a warm bed, and the kinkers are left with that uneasy pull to move on, but with no place to go.

I pulled my keister behind me on the broken sidewalk, making what seemed like a tremendous racket, but no one stuck their heads out any windows to yell. Within four blocks, I could glimpse Griebing Avenue and its enviable collection of cooch shows. If a man couldn't find what he wanted here, it's because no one's thought of it yet—and believe me, they've thought of everything. The street's salacious reputation is immortalized in the old joke: "Do you like Griebing?" asked a fine young fellow of a lady on the corner. "Oh, yes, I do," said she, "but it's 50 bucks extra, and you pay for the harness."

I walked past Frenchy's Club, with its silly Eiffel Towers and dancing poodles painted all over the walls like a fun house. Further along, I admired the minarets and

burlap palm trees of the Little Assyria. In its windows was a three-sheet describing the current show:

**“25 of the World’s most Captivating Beauties
dance for you in the manner of
Salome, Scheherazade and the other enticing Sirens of History!
Experience the Temptations of the
Ancient Patriarchs!
Shocking! Instructional! Unbelievable!”**

While I’m not a religious fellow, I made a note to check it out sometime.

Finally my destination came into view, the classiest joint on that classless street, the Club Bimbo. Its bulb-studded marquee glistened in the morning light, looking eager to get switched on again. Unlike some clubs, the Bimbo didn’t even bother to list the current attractions outside; everybody knew you could get something there that you couldn’t get at home, unless you happened to live with Caligula or Catherine the Great.

The owner and I went way back. Lotta Mudflaps had been some doll, curves in all the right places, times 20, plus a few in places you wouldn’t expect. While she may have lost her title as “World’s Daintiest Fat Lady,” she still had plenty of energy and ambition. A jill running her own cooch show needed plenty of moxie, but that was Lotta all over. And over, and some more over there.

I tried the front door and was surprised to find it open. From the small red-carpeted lobby, I could hear someone inside the theater on piano playing a sad old song I couldn’t place. I left my trunk by the vacant hat check window, tossed an imaginary tip in the bowl and turned down a hallway looking for Lotta’s office. Coming in from the morning sunshine, I thought the place looked especially dark and filled with strange possibilities. From behind a flimsy wooden door came voices, one of which was instantly recognizable as Lotta’s. She had a booming whoop that was the envy of every

cowgirl on the Pecos. I'd been skulking in the hall no more than a minute, when chairs scraped and the door was opened. Out stepped a dapper old man with a trimmed white beard. He was dressed in a green wool suit, white shirt and a neat checked bowtie. In one hand he carried a Homburg hat and in the other a walking stick, which he needed because of a gimpy left leg. When he caught sight of me, he sized me with a steady eye. I retreated against the wall a bit to let him through.

Lotta followed him through the door. When she saw me, her expression was as over-the-top as something out of a silent movie, except it wasn't silent in the least.

"Rex! Fer heaven's sake! What are yew doin' here?"

"Hey, Lotta, how ya doin'?"

"Fine as old wine, sugah," she said. "This is a surprise. Rex, may I introduce to yew a fine gentleman of the old school, Mr. T.C. Montgomery? We were just discussing a lil business. Mr. Montgomery, this is my dear friend, the lord of laughter, Rex Koko."

Montgomery continued to size me up rather coolly, tipping his head back to take me in better. But I took a cool expression as a win these days. He extended his long, slender hand to me and said, "A pleasure, sir. I take it you are a friend from old performing days?"

"Yeah, me and Lotta go back a few years."

"He knew me back in my girlish youth, WOO-hoo-hoo-hooo," said Lotta.

Montgomery smiled, showing nests of wrinkles around his bright, moist eyes. It looked like life had been rough with him, but that he could give as good as he got. "Ah, the bonds that form between you troupers. The fraternity of showmen. Old friendships die hard, I daresay?"

“That’s what I’m counting on,” I said.

Lotta peered at me quickly, thinking maybe I came to sponge money instead of suds. It was only a fleeting look, but it made me feel guilty just the same. Montgomery chortled at my remark, and his dentures gave a short, rapid rattle, like the sound of half-dollars being stacked.

“Many people would envy that sense of camaraderie, Mr. Koko.”

“You with the show, Montgomery?”

“More or less, but it was many moons ago, and the story’s not worth telling,” he confided. “In any event, I must run. Sir, madam, good day to you both.” And with that, he settled his hat atop his coconut, rattled his choppers again, and left through the lobby.

“He’s a slick old bird,” I said, as we turned and walked the other way. “Sniffing around for some showgirls’ phone numbers?”

“Rex, I’m surprised. Yew don’t know T.C. Montgomery? He’s one of the richest men in Top Town, and one of the nicest gentlemen. He doesn’t go trawlin’ fer showgirls. He doesn’t need to.”

“Then what’s he doin’ around here?”

“The better question,” she said, smiling a little too directly at me, “is what are yew doin’ around here? Y’been sneakin’ around corners and shadows for so long around here, people were wonderin’ had yew packed up and left town.”

The two of us squeezed into Lotta’s office, all red flocking and tasseled lampshades, and she wedged herself into the chair behind her desk. She was wearing a chemise of royal blue silk, patterned with subtle diamond shapes. Her brown hair was

parted on the side and grew into a wavy nest behind each ear. The only jewelry she wore was a gold anklet (double-length) with a charm dangling from it. Once upon a time, she told me the charm was inscribed, "Heaven's Above."

"I've been in business all along," I stretched the truth a bit. "Maybe I kept my profile too low."

"A low profile's one thing, sugah," Lotta said, lighting a gasper, "but yew look like yew've been burrowing underground. I don't mind tellin' yew, Rex, I've been worried about yew. Disappearing for weeks on end. I don't even know how t'get a hold of yew if I need to."

"C'mon, girl, you know I always land on my feet. Kind of hard not to." For emphasis, I waved them in the air and accidentally knocked the shade off her desk lamp.

"Yeah, always the tough guy. Just don't forget yer friends around town."

"Hey, I came to see you, didn't I?"

"Mmmm-hmmm, I sure did notice," she purred looking at me sideways. "Maybe yew and I can start back where we left off, hmmm? It's been a long time since I been with a man who knows how to treat me right!"

This was what I was afraid of. I returned her flirtation as breezily as I could. "Anything's possible, dollface, but you wouldn't want to be seen with me in my current state. Better that I have a boil-up before I start on my new job."

"Job?" she bellowed, shaking the glasses in the room. "Rex, you're on a show again?"

“Get serious, Lotta,” I said. “Why would I want to be back on a show? My timing’s off, everyone’s stolen my best bits, and...well, the rest of it.”

“What yew mean is,” she said tiredly, “yew got another job as a dick.”

“That’s right. Someone hired me to find his wife and bring her back home.”

“Who’d do a thing like that?” she asked.

“I don’t think I should betray that confidence, Lotta.”

“C’mon, Rex, it’s a cinch to figure.”

I waved her off. “I’m sorry. Professional code. My lips are zipped.”

“It’s Reynaldo Carlozo, right?”

“Wrong! It’s Reynaldo Carlozo. Ha, smarty! So how about that boil-up?”

She smiled. “I just put in a nice shower by the dressing rooms. You’d be welcome to use it before the girls come in for the businessmen’s luncheon.”

“Lotta, you don’t understand. I need to soak. I need to soak every bit of grime and grease outta me, every last drop of booze, every little stalk of hay, and then I need to soak some more. A shower ain’t gonna cut the mustard.”

“If y’want to be old-fashioned, go ahead,” she said. “I can find yew a nice tub with hot water in the backyard... but only if I get to scrub yer back.”

With her lewd, cartoonish grin, I couldn’t tell if Lotta was kidding or not. When we first met, back with Reverend Underdown’s Miracle Show, she was after me like a duck on a Junebug. One time, after a few too many rye squashes on a rained-out night in some backwater Illinois town, she and I had a little wrestling match. From what I can remember, I lost, both the match and the feeling in my legs. Ever since, she’s always

been ready to pipe up the band again. It flatters my ego but threatens my sacroiliac. Right now, I needed all the friends I could get. Lovers would have to wait.

“I still have my modesty, Lotta,” I joked. “You’ll have to wear a blindfold.”

“Even better! That way, I can use my hands for feelin’ around when I drop the soap.” My face must’ve betrayed me, because she said, “Oh, come on, Rex honey. Don’t start believing your own ballyhoo. I’m a businesswoman now, not some debutante lookin’ to fill her dance card. I’ll fix yew up, don’t worry about that. It’s good to see you get back in the game, even as a detective.”

“Time marches on, Lotta. I’ve got the footprints up my back to prove it. Now, what’s up with that Montgomery gink?”

“What’s with all the questions, punkin?” she asked sweetly but firmly. “Y’think having that big nose means you can stick it in everyone’s business? If yew have to know, Mr. Montgomery is going to invest in my club.”

“Is the Bimbo in trouble? I always thought you were bringing in money pasties over g-string.”

“Costs a lot to run a club these days,” she said with resignation. “I’ve got to pay my dancers top dollar, or else they might jump ship for Fatima’s or the Little Assyria. Then there’s upkeep, liquor, patch....”

“You’re already the most expensive joint on Griebing Street and you still can’t make your nut?”

She heaved a great sigh and gave me a prickly look. “Lissen, y’wanna get clean, or y’wanna criticize how I do business?”

Smart move, Rex. Why don't you tell her to try a more flattering hairstyle while you're at it? "Sorry, old ton. I'll button my flap." To my left I saw a small table, on top of which sat a silver tray with a seltzer bottle, whiskey, bourbon, and a pair of tumblers from the bar. "Before the boil-up, how about a drink?"

"Now, Rex," she said worriedly, "don't y'think it's a mite early....?"

Before she could finish, I grabbed the seltzer bottle and gave myself a hefty dousing of fizz water. In my mouth, up my nose, all over my coat. Lotta's concerned face relaxed and she gave up a good laugh.

"Ya-ha, good stuff!" I said, smacking my lips. I pointed the nozzle at her. "Join me? I hate to drink alone."

She shielded herself with her hands quickly. I pressed the lever and shot myself in the face again. It felt even better the second time. Recognizing one of my signature gags, Lotta whooped like a hyena on laughing gas.

CHAPTER 3

SHOOT THE MOON

In the Bimbo's back yard, Lotta set up an old washtub, filled it with buckets of hot water from the tap, and dutifully brought out teakettle after boiling teakettle to keep it comfy for me. Depending on where she poured, the water was either an invigorating flood of warmth or a threat to future generations of Kokos. Either way, it all felt good. I had a lot to sweat out, and this was the perfect way to do it.

Lotta hung a sheet on a line to give me a little privacy outside, but no one paid me much mind. On this fine morning, Top Town paid no attention to an old joey having a boil-up. Some of the girls from the club, however, kept finding excuses to come out in the yard, trying to check the old wives' tale about the size of a clown's feet and the rest of his anatomy, bless 'em.

Later Lotta brought out an old cane chair and threatened its continued existence as she sat and talked with me tubside. As I scrubbed my hide with a pig bristle brush, we cut up jackpots about the old days with the Underdown show, then with O'Heir's Parade of Oddities. We'd had some good times out on the road, stuff that only another kinker would appreciate.

"I sent yer duds out to be laundered, honey. Yer agent suit was in terrible shape."

"I know. Might have to get a new one made, once I grow a little hay."

"So, Carlozo's paying you to bring his wife back home, huh? Shoot, I could do the job with a fishing line and a pair of pants."

“Oh? What do you know about her?”

“I’ve seen her a few times, heard a few stories. She’s been waltzing around behind her husband’s back for years. That’s how she got her nickname, y’know—settin’ her boots outside just anyone’s trailer. She’s already gone through almost all the flyers and catchers in town.”

“Was Boots some kind of flyer, too?”

Lotta examined her nails nonchalantly, as if she weren’t savoring every minute of this gossip. “Mmmm-hmmm. Apparently she was pretty good in her time. Trapeze, slack wire, iron jaw. Couldn’t stick with one, I guess, so she played the whole card. Just like she does now. Last I heard, she was shackin’ up with Berndt Bork.”

“Yikes! Boiled cabbage for breakfast again?”

“WOO-hoo-hoo-hooo! No, ya big kidder, that ain’t gas. Yew know Berndt Bork. He calls himself the Human Howitzer, parks his cannon over on Adler Street.”

I nodded but kept my mouth shut. I had no idea who she was talking about. I must’ve been in the fog pretty long, if I hadn’t heard of a kinker who explodes for a living. “You say she’s over there now?”

“Can’t tell ya fer sure. Last I heard, though, she was keepin’ his barrel nice and polished.”

“If that’s the flap on the street, why does Carlozo need me to find her?”

“Beats me, honey,” she said. “Yew wanna be a detective, better start askin’ those questions yourself. But when yew catch up with Boots, give her a lil message from me, wouldja, sugah?”

“What’s that?” I said, soaping my toes.

“Tell her that if she ever tries to sink her claws into my Rex, I’ll tear off her head and use it for a flower pot.” The water in the tub suddenly felt chilly. I turned my head and looked in Lotta’s steady gaze. She was three towns from kidding. “Now, if yew’ll excuse me, I know some police who need paying off. Toodle-oo-hoo.” With a mighty heave, Lotta got to her feet and waddled back inside the club.

It’s nice to be wanted, I guess, if a little frightening.

Now, if even Lotta knew where Boots was camped out, what was stopping Carlozo from going to find his own wife? Couldn’t he be bothered with the job? Had he been treated like royalty for so long that he got everything done through vassals and peasants? Maybe he didn’t really want her back but for appearance’s sake had to make a big spec of it. I was pretty sure he didn’t really mean “kill” when he said “kill”, just like I never mean “repay” or “apologize”. When the water in my tub finally got cold, I got out and toweled myself off. If I didn’t feel quite human yet, at least I felt less like the scraps from an elephant’s breakfast. Back inside the club, Lotta found me a place to shave, using one of the girls’ dull razors. Staring back at me in the mirror over the sink was a well-worn, middle-aged joey, with an insolent Adam’s apple, a crimson schnoz more long than round, and eyebrows arching high over exhausted brown eyes. My hair was still orange without a trace of gray, and without hope of ever covering more than the bottom third of my skull again. All in all, time had cut me some slack. I looked better than I felt, and I felt better than I had any right to.

Lotta had brought my agent suit to the dressing room, fresh from the cleaners. The overcoat was a shabby embarrassment, the yellow looking like dried mustard and the red circles dull and lifeless. It definitely needed replacing soon. But my little fedora

still looked good, after spiffing it up with a toothbrush I found on the sink. I gave the same treatment to my shoes and walked to Lotta's office. She wasn't there, so I helped myself to a cup of coffee and a couple biscuits from her secret larder, then started off.

Out in the hazy sunshine, I pointed my 42s down Griebing toward Adler. Despite feeling clean, shaved and fed, I still had a vaporous twinge of misgiving. You'd think I'd be used to this feeling by now, but here it was again. The streets of Top Town hadn't changed nor, I was guessing, had people's attitudes. But short of capturing Hitler single-handedly, there wasn't much I could do about it. Half the voices in my head were telling me to go back to Daisy's stall and curl up until dark. The other half kept saying, "Pratfall, pratfall! Come on, Rex, trip on something! Yay! Big laughs!"

I really need to have a word soon with the voices in my head.

As I turned left on Grimaldi Street—Top Town's main street, if you could say it had one—a pungent aroma told me I was getting near the Monkey Hostel. In warm weather, when the windows are open, anyone walking by is guaranteed a nasty barrage from the residents of the hostel, so I grabbed the lid of a nearby trashcan and used it as a shield. Ptannng! Ptannng! The monks made two direct hits, but other than that I came out okay.

I threw my shield aside and, not watching where I was going, bumped into something large and solid. In front of me on the sidewalk, wearing a dirty brown canvas jacket and a battered cap, stood Missouri Redd, one of the Redd Brothers, a gang of Top Town roustabouts always looking for a clem. (They were actually all half-brothers whose father, while traveling with troupes over the years, littered the country with

bastard red-headed whelps all the way up into Canada.) I'd never dealt with Missouri, but he had advance as the Redd with the shortest fuse and the thickest skull.

"Watch where yer goin', clown," he growled through yellow teeth.

"My mistake, brother. Just trying to dodge some simian valentines."

Answering him seemed to make him angrier. "What th' hell are you talkin'?" he said, his complexion like bad corned beef. "I don't want no explanation from you, I want you outta my way."

"I'll get right on that, pal, as soon as you quit standing on my feet."

"Y'know somethin', you got a smart mouth. It's gonna get you in trouble someday."

Before I knew it, Missouri Redd grabbed me and tossed me back in front of the Monkey Hostel. I tripped over my own feet and sprawled on the sidewalk. His mean, piggy eyes gleamed with poisonous joy as I was pelted with monkey muck from the open windows. The monkeys screeched and hooted, for all I know keeping score of the bulls-eyes. I picked myself up and ran into the street, out of reach of the roustabout, and kept on running. The inbred moron just watched with intense satisfaction, so nasty that his mirth could only sneak out of his mouth in little gasps.

Lucky for me, no crowd was around to witness my humiliation. Just a venomous goon weaned on stumpwater and axle grease and two dozen monkeys screeching in satisfaction. When I stopped running, I looked at my formerly clean agent suit. The muck made a few small stains that a little water could daub out, but that pug left two black hand prints on my chest when he pushed me. Some kind of grease or oil, and it would be a helluva time getting it out. I got my hankie out of my pocket and wiped off

my coat as I walked. I'd send my cleaning bill to Missouri Redd if I knew which boxcar he was sleeping under.

I turned down Adler Street, looking for Bork's. I passed a grocery store, a closed mitt camp, a guess-your-weight booth, and a liquor store, then turned a bend and saw the silver barrel of a cannon hanging 15 feet over the sidewalk. Unless some admiral had dry-docked his battleship here, it looked like I'd found the Human Howitzer. A high plank fence surrounded the lot, but the door was unlocked, so I pushed my way in.

The lot had that "lived-in" look, like an Army motor pool had lived in it for the better part of a decade. Metal drums were scattered around as if by some heavy-industry Easter bunny, plus crates, boilers, tires and scrap metal. Puddles of mud, oil and who knew what else made walking dangerous. And amid all this dismal grime stood a firm-jawed blonde man in a spotless silver jumpsuit, staring off into the distance, looking like a Viking captain at the helm of his rowboat.

He didn't notice when I entered the yard. I cleared my throat a few times and kicked a stray can or two, but our intrepid hero still stared into the distance, his crash helmet tucked under his arm. When I got close enough to tap him on his silver shoulder, I managed to scare him silly.

"Sorry about that," I said. "You Berndt Bork?"

"I didn't hear you come up," he said. "Then again, my hearing ain't what it used to be."

"Am I interrupting practice?"

"Yep. Gotta get back on the road soon, earn some spread. With our boys winning in Europe now, it won't be long before people will be able to handle an act like

mine again. For a while, people just didn't like a guy with a German name driving around with a big cannon."

Sounded like a cheap rationalization to me—stage names are as common as head lice among kinkers—but I wasn't this guy's confessor. "I'm looking for someone, Addie Carlozo. She been around here?"

His face turned suspicious. "And who the hell are you, barging onto a guy's lot and asking questions?"

"Just a joey doing a favor for someone. I ain't looking for trouble."

"Yeah, I don't know you from Adam."

"Name's Rex Koko. Tell you what. You just answer my questions, and I'll help you out, Buck Rogers. I'll go over there and be your net-sitter for a while, as you practice your...jumps? Shoots? Bangs? Whatever you call 'em, your whooshes through the air."

Bork sighed and looked off in the distance again. I don't know much about this kind of act, but I thought his whole cannon apparatus was mighty impressive. Resting on the flat bed of a pick-up truck, it was shiny as a newlywed's frying pan and studded with a couple thousand rivets. The truck was up on wooden blocks, and held down against recoil with ropes and stakes like Gulliver on a beach vacation. From the look of it, Bork could slap on the wheels and drive his peashooter to any circus or county fair he wanted. But after sitting for a couple years, it was going to be that much harder for man and machine to hit the road again.

"All right, clown, I'll level with you. Boots was here for about a week. Then last Sunday she disappears. No note, nothing. Easy come, easy go."

“Meaning...”

“Meaning, one day she just showed up at my door, ready to bunk up. I’d met her once or twice, but we barely knew each other, and she showed up here like she was expectin’ a surprise party or somethin’.”

“Where’d she go?”

“Search me. I wasn’t going to follow her. She was a looker, but from the start I knew she wasn’t going to stick around. She had those kind of eyes that were always searching for the next chump to latch on to.”

“You knew she was married.”

“Sure, I knew it. Said her old man wasn’t doing it for her anymore, since he didn’t hit the trapeze. Things were pretty ugly at home. She said he was always ready to hit her.”

“Did he?”

“Don’t know. She had such a mouth on her, there were times I thought of hitting her myself. Don’t get me wrong, that’s not my style. But she was one mouthy, demanding broad. Helluva temper, too.”

“Do you know her husband?”

“Not really. Just the name.”

“And you got no idea of where she went?”

“No. I’m telling you, that’s all I know. Now, I’d like to get in one more flight before lunch. You gonna net-sit for me? Head that way.”

Bork strapped on his reinforced aviator’s cap and climbed up the ladder near the opening of the cannon. With a well practiced move, he grabbed the metal handle on top

of the barrel, lifted himself up and slid himself in feet first, slick as a wiener in a bun. Satisfied that everything was OK, he gave me a thumbs up and disappeared inside. I started to walk down the lot to where his safety net was strung, stepping carefully among all the puddles and debris, which were such a contrast to the sleek sheen of Bork himself and all his gear. Maybe he galvanized himself every night before he went to bed.

Behind me I heard a crack, then a massive thump that made the ground shake. Turning around, I saw something was screwy. From where I was, it looked like Bork's truck and cannon had fallen backward, off its blocks. The barrel was no longer aimed straight above me, but instead was pointing up and off to the east. The instant I thought of running back to do something—anything—to help Bork, the cannon fired. Whistling in an eerie way, the Human Howitzer flew by so quickly the expression on his face was a blur. All I could see was the flash of the sun off his goggles before he passed from sight, headed for an unpleasant rendezvous with something solid a couple of streets over.