

Playing Straight

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Chapter 1

Chicken.

„Tell y‘u we don‘t want a piefaced, sawed off little runt like y‘u in th‘ gang. Yer middle name‘s Chicken, and y‘u ain‘t got th‘ nerve t‘ scare a woodenlegged cop. Beat it before I push yer face in.“

Big Bill, boss of the Maude Street gang, banged the table with the flat of his hamlike hand and jerked his head in the direction of the door. The freckled, sallow-faced youth standing before him, ventured a protest. Membership in the toughest gang of the neighborhood was an honor, and carried with it a prestige that was coveted by all the young wasters and loungers within a mile circle of the gang’s headquarters.

„Aw, Bill,“ said *The Bantam Kid*. „Y‘u don‘t mean that. Y‘u ain‘t goin‘ t‘ run me outer th‘ ole gang f‘r nothin‘. Y‘u can‘t—“

„I can‘t!“ exclaimed *Big Bill*, with vicious ferocity. „Watch me an see if I‘m a liar.“

The Maude Street leader wiped his lips on the back of his hairy fist, and, assuring himself by a swift glance around the room that there were no gun-toting sympathizers with *The Bantam Kid*, shot out his long left arm. His victim wriggled and swore and clawed like a wild cat; but the grip on his neck tightened, and he was forced face down on the table. A glass overturned and crashed to the floor. The Kid’s snub nose was squashed into a pool of beer dregs.

„Goin‘?“ asked *Big Bill*. „Or have I gotter use y‘r face t‘ swab up this here table?“

A howl of bestial laughter went up at this novel exhibition of brute strength. The herd of assembled toughs behaved as a mob always does—they followed the example of a popular leader. The same animal instinct of savagery that sets a pack of wolves to tearing and devouring a weaker or wounded member, swayed the crowd that gathered, jostling and gloating, round the table. With no more effort than if he were holding a kitten, *Big Bill* carried out his threat. The *Bantam Kid*’s face made a wide, circular smear on the filthy table, and the mob hastily parted as *Big Bill* literally flung his captive through the air.

The *Bantam Kid* landed in a heap ten feet away, and, bellowing with laughter, the gang leader stood waiting for the vain threats, the futile splutter of curses that he expected would follow the rise of *The Kid*. His laughter ceased, and the others expectant of a frenzied outburst from the slowly rising victim, stood silently waiting.

The spell lasted until *The Bantam Kid* got to his feet and reached the door. There he turned and faced the waiting crowd. Then, in absolute silence, *The Kid* opened the door and passed out. He had spoken no word, made no gesture; but the stony stare of his light-gray eyes had conveyed the impression of an unbreakable resolve. He had been thrown out of the gang. Broken and disgraced he had gone, yet every tough in that room was convinced of one thing: some time in the future a bullet or a knife thrust would land in the small of *Big Bill*’s back, and a new gang leader would be required.

„Some nerve!“ muttered *Bill*. „Let’s have another drink.“

For the rest of the evening, Big Bill's laugh was as loud as usual, his words as boastful; but now and again a look of haunting fear crept into his crafty, peering eyes. The poison installed in his mind by The Bantam Kid's wordless threat was beginning to work.

The next day, Bill made the discovery that his assault on The Kid had failed of its real, ulterior purpose. He had wanted the Kid out of the gang, but that had not been Big Bill's sole reason. There was a girl, and in evidence that she resented Bill's coarse overtures to replace The Bantam Kid in her affections, she scared the gangster's cheek with three long scratches.

„The Kid's gone,“ she said shrilly, „but I tell y'u he'll be back. Come near me ag'in an' I'll scratch yer eyes out, y'u big bluff! Watch out fer Th' Kid. He's comin' back!“

Big Bill swore vindictively, but for weeks he never turned a comer without keeping a hand on his gun, or passed a darkened doorway without a sidelong, furtive glance. He lost weight and the constant strain of the fear of sudden death wore his temper to shreds of peevish irritability. His nerve broke.

One night he glimpsed a shadow lurking behind him. He fired and ten seconds later discovered he had almost killed a policeman. Fortunately for him he was not recognized and the policeman recovered. But day and night Big Bill's thoughts and dreams were tortured by visions of disaster. In fancy he died a thousand deaths. By the end of a year after The Bantam Kid's disappearance, Big Bill was bolstering his courage with booze, and his power as a leader of the Maude Street gang was fast dwindling. Has beens are of no more use in the underworld than they are in legitimate business.

Chapter 2

The Return of the Bantam Kid.

Then The Bantam Kid returned, and the manner of his coming was far removed from all conjecture. According to all precedent, he should have come with a gun or knife, have carried out his revenge, and slunk again into hiding. He should have reappeared with a scowl on his freckled face, instead of which he came with a smile and, what was more astounding still, with money to bum. He radiated prosperity and forgiveness of all wrongs.

With one or two exceptions the same members of the Maude Street gang that had witnessed his going, were present on his return. And the same waiting silence fell upon them when he opened the door. Over in a corner Big Bill sat with his finger crooked round the trigger of his automatic. His coarse mouth agape, he stared fixedly at The Bantam Kid.

The tension was electric, the release amazing. Smiling at his enemy, The Kid placed a finger and thumb in his vest pocket and drew out a twenty-dollar bill.

„Drinks round,“ he said, smiling,

Naturally enough, the Maude Street gang did not at once accept The Kid's hospitality without mistrust and many sidelong glances and whispered words. Big Bill's piggy, suspicious gaze did not miss a single move of The Bantam, but neither he nor any of the others failed to absorb the rounds of drinks that came out of the twenty-dollar bill.

As the evening wore on, it became evident that The Bantam Kid was determined to ignore all reference to the time when he had been so badly mauled and jeered at. It was generally agreed that he was all yellow and had come back to make a splurge and a show of his money. But whatever opinion was held by each member of the gang, it did not prevent any one of them from guzzling at The Bantam Kid's expense. Some of Big Bill's bombast returned, but he led the others in toadying to The Kid.

„May as well play up t' him while he's got th' coin,“ he muttered in the ear of a fellow gangster. „He must ha' struck it rich, but y'u can bet it ain't goin' t' last long.“

For over a week, The Bantam Kid showed up at the gang's headquarters, but though he changed either a twenty- or a fifty-dollar bank note each night, his wealth showed no sign of diminishing.

„He must 'ave got a roll as long as my arm,“ said the gang leader at a secret conference. „But he don't never carry more'n one bill on him or—“

Big Bill's pause was significant of what would befall The Bantam Kid if he were fool enough to carry his money in one wad.

„How'd he get it?“ inquired one who had laughed loudest and now drank deepest at The Kid's expense.

Big Bill snorted in disgust.

„How should I know,“ he muttered. „He ain't got no nerve nor no brains either, but he must have got the coin somewhere. It ain't phony, an' y'u don't pick up a' roll like he's got, on th' street. What's th' answer?“ No one could say.

That night, various clumsy attempts were made to get The Kid to talk, but although he admitted that his funds were inexhaustible, he would not disclose how he had made his pile. The gang's interest in the mystery became an obsession. Curiosity and greed grew to a frantic desire to learn the truth, and Big Bill brooded over the deed of violence he would commit if he could find out the place where The Kid kept his money. In the presence of The Bantam, Bill's bloated visage wore a fixed grin, but there was murder in his drink-muddled thoughts.

Then, in the monotony of The Kid's nightly distribution of free drinks, there came an astounding break—and still more convincing evidence that his roll was no padded fake. He drove up to the dive in an automobile with a mustard-yellow body and cherry-red wheels. On the seat beside him sat the girl whose finger nails had left their mark of disapproval on Big Bill's cheek. A diamond as big as a navy bean glistened on her finger. She rustled in silk.

The gang gathered in the doorway of the passage leading to the back room, where they held their meetings, and craned their necks in wonder. A crowd blocked the sidewalk and a policeman came up. He eyed the resplendent car with a hungry, speculative look; but although he and every detective in the precinct were aware that The Bantam Kid was scattering money like a crazy millionaire, they were powerless to do more than think.

Every one was certain that The Bantam Kid had pulled off some clever bit of crooked work; but the police were in exactly the same position as the Maude Street gang. They were all guessing.

Chapter 3

The Invitation.

Leaving his girl in the car, The Bantam Kid stepped out jauntily. He was dressed to kill and the smoke of his huge cigar drifted in tantalizing wreaths past the cop's nostrils. The Kid's grin was impudent, but it held the quality of assurance.

„You may sniff at my sec-gar,“ he murmured, „but y'u can't lay a finger on me.“

Then he pushed his way through the gang, wedged in the passage, and when they were all assembled in the back room, he made a little speech.

„Boys,“ he said, „me an' th' kid outside is goin' t' be spliced t'night. We've got th' house all fixed up, th' sky pilot's waitin', an' th' eats an' th' re-freshments is all laid out.“

The Bantam Kid paused to let this information sink in; then he continued: „I dessay y'u fellers, not fergetting' Bill here, is all wonderin' how it is I come t' be so friendly after th' way I quit this place more'n a year ago. Well, I reckon I've already showed y'u that I ain't holdin' no ill feelin's. To tell y'u th' honest truth, I owe every cent of this pile of kale I've got, t' Bill. I hit on a line of graft that's a sure winner, an' if Bill hadn't did what he done, I'd never've been worth a brass nickel. So I ask all you boys t' pile in an' celebrate.“

Grunts and murmurs of approval signified that the gang was willing to partake of anything that was free, and when The Bantam hinted that he would disclose the secret of his wealth, Big Bill led the stream of eager gangsters out to the car.

With careful observance of the speed limit, Bantam drove some twenty miles out of town. The car drew up in front of a large, isolated house, and The Kid conducted his party to a big front room. A table was loaded with food, and the buffet was packed with bottles.

„Th' sky pilot ain't come yet,“ muttered the Bantam. Then he added mysteriously: „Tell y'u what, I was goin' t' keep th' little surprise I have fer y'u until after we got outside them eats and drinks. I guess I'll show y'u right away.“

Chapter 4

Phony.

Thirsty but curious, the gang followed the small, dapper figure to the basement. The Kid flung open a door and switched on the light. He pointed to an object that stood in the center of the bare room. It was shrouded with canvas, but there were bulges and inequalities in the gray surface that suggested some kind of machine.

„After t'night,“ said The Kid, „I'm going t' break it up. It's safer. I've got all th' dough I'll need f'r th' rest of my life, in th' bank.“

Big Bill strode forward. „Y'u mean t' tell us you've been makin' phony bills!“ he exclaimed as he wrenched off the canvas. The rest crowded round, eager to see the marvel that could turn out unlimited wealth. Then the light went out

and the door closed. Blank, impenetrable darkness fell on the stunned and fearsomitten gang. There came the rattle of a can, and the muffled voice of The Kid.

„There’s five gallons of gas runnin’ under th’ door,“ he said. „If any of you boobs strikes a match y’u all go to—pieces. Don’t try no gun play, either. Wait fer th’ nex’ act.“

A curse came from Big Bill, and the toughs, panic-stricken, started walking wildly about the enclosure. The stench of gasoline stung their throats and they broke into hoarse pleadings to be released.

A sound from above stilled them to silence again and they looked up. In the ceiling was a dim, circular hole. With uplifted heads and staring gaze the gang bunched beneath the opening.

„Y’u got yer own back, Kid,“ shouted Big Bill. „Now let up and—“

A thump that shook the house to its foundations cut short the gangster’s plea.

An avalanche of thick, viscid fluid poured over the edge of the opening and dropped in a flowing blanket over the gang. Howling with new dismay, the bunch of men broke apart but although they crouched against the wall and sought the farthest corners of their prison, they could not escape the final touch of artistry that The Bantam Kid bestowed upon them. A soft, fleecy cloud enveloped them. Then came darkness again.

Two minutes later, a yellow and red car was speeding away from the isolated house.

„Honey,“ whispered The Bantam Kid, „we start west t’night. I’ve been spendin’ a lot of cash lately an’ we gotten settle down t’ a quiet life. It’s a shame t’ leave all that booze an’ stuff behind, but I had t’ do things proper an’ convincin’.“ Then he sighed contentedly. „The tar an’ th’ feathers an’ that junk printin’ machine was cheap, though.“

Five miles farther on, the girl nestled to The Bantam’s side. „An’ from now on you’ll go straight?“ she asked.

The Bantam Kid laughed.

„Surest thing y’ know, kiddo. Why wouldn’t I? I’ve got a hundred and ninety thousand dollars in th’ bank. I ain’t done a crooked thing since Bill chucked me out of th’ gang.“

„Then how—“

The Bantam Kid explained the mystery in twenty-one words: „I went to a uncle’s in Chicago. Played straight with him, an’ the ole boy died an’ left me his money.“

„What a slice of luck!“ exclaimed the girl.

„Dunno ‘bout that,“ murmured The Kid. „If Bill hadn’t cut up rough, I’d never of quit. Say, I guess I’ll hop off here an’ phone th’ cops there’s a bunch of blackbirds waitin’ for ‘em.“

He stopped the automobile, went into a drug store, and sent a message to police headquarters. When he reentered the motor car, he was smiling broadly.

„Gee, kid,“ he said, „I’d like to pipe off those guys when the cops walk in. But we’ve important business of our own on hand, ain’t we, girlie? Full speed ahead!“

