



The Kid took out six five-hundred-dollar bills and held them up to Rocky. "You taking my bet?" he asked softly.

Swindler's Luck

By BEN HECHT

The mobsters would kill him if they ever caught on to his game.

He was betting his life they wouldn't.

ILLUSTRATED BY EARL MAYAN

IRNEW him when he was called the Sunset Kid and also Moony Dan. The first name came to him because he used to drive to the Santa Monica beach late every afternoon and watch the sun go down. He said it made him lucky. And if there was ever a man who needed a lot of luck, it was the Sunset Kid. For the Kid was a crook who devoted himself to swindling members of the underworld.

He specialized in trimming big-shot bookies and professional card gamblers. Among these he was called a "thief," which is the name illegal gamblers righteously pin on any kind of con man. Yet knowing the Kid for a thief, they let him come around and swindle them year after year. They played cards with him and took his bets on horses, and even went in on deals with him—and always got trimmed.

The Kid prospered as a thief because not only luck but psychology was on his side. The psychology was the egoism of the big-shot crooks whom he swindled, plus the ennui in which they lived, plus their childlike interest in everything crooked.

They were wise guys who knew all the angles and who boasted that no thief could hang anything on them. The fact that the Kid constantly disproved this theory made them only eager for "a return



match." And it was understood between the Kid and his victims that they would have to catch him only once. There was a lot of fascination in it for the suckers, watching a man fool them with his life at stake on a slip-up.

The name Moony Dan came to the Kid as a result of his unusual fondness for women. This is an uncommon trait among crooks, whose relation to women is likely to be crude and sketchy. Women are a minor trouble and a lesser delight in their lives.

It was otherwise with the Sunset Kid, alias Moony Dan. His love affairs had been always as important to him as his crimes. At thirty-five he was paying alimony to two ex-wives—a fact which made his underworld contacts regard him as a bigger sucker than any of the wise guys he fleeced.

"I don't pay them money because the law tells me to," the Kid told me. "I pay it because I owe it to them, on account of they once made me happy."

This was five years ago. I asked the Kid another question at that time. He was a good-looking physical specimen. I asked him how he had stayed out of the war.

"My heart," he said. "I've got a ticker that can't take much strain. Sometimes I've got to stay in bed for a couple of days at a time."

"Sorry to hear that," I said.

"It works out," the Kid smiled. "I got to do my practice—and figuring—that way." The practice, I learned, was with a deck of cards, and the figuring was a new swindle to work on the wise guys who were gunning for him.

I was with the Kid when he met Annie Bond, and I saw a thing happen that is seldom believable when you read about it. I saw two people fall in love at first sight like a pair of cymbals coming together. It happened so quickly and reasonably that I thought they were both kidding for my benefit. It wasn't only love that sat down with us at that back table in the Mexican restaurant. Death also modestly introduced himself.

The Kid was always a neat, well-dressed fellow. He had a moody, somewhat sarcastic-looking face and a crop of curly black hair. I'd always thought him a normally attractive man. But looking at him as Annie Bond sat beside him, I saw a man of beauty. Emotion seemed to give him a new face.

I didn't know Annie well enough to know how deep or how novel was the look she turned on the Sunset Kid. In a girl of virtue and modesty, it would have been pretty convincing. But Annie was of another category. She was no tramp, for she worked hard for a living. As an entertainer in this somewhat shabby Mexican night spot, Annie sang

twenty or thirty songs an evening, changed her costumes several times and did a few dance numbers.

But she was a girl who had had bad luck with men. Beginning when she was twenty, which was eight years before she looked at the Sunset Kid, she had always picked the wrong man or, rather, been picked by him.

She had come to Hollywood from Amarillo, Texas—red-haired and shapely, with a fair singing voice and a wagonload of temperament. Her tops had been a few bit parts in the studios, and she had slid down from there. She sang in out-of-the-way cafés when "she got a break," she told me once. The rest of the time she clerked in stores or waited on tables or risked her life for fifty dollars a day as a stunt rider in a Western movie. She was good on a horse. And she had earned her own living every week of the eight years.

The bad luck in her love affairs came out of the fact that she attracted men who were weak and floundering around with a half talent and a half manhood. They were apt to be entertainers on the skids like herself, or idlers with an angle, or over-dressed errand boys for mysterious big shots. There hadn't been too many, but there had been enough to make Annie Bond, at twenty-eight, a far cry from the innocent who had left Amarillo. The red hair was still there and

(Continued on Page 51)

SWINDLER'S LUCK

(Continued from Page 19)

the shapeliness and the unafraid lift of her neck. But the eight years had left a dust on her heart and a sneer in her eyes.

I thought of this as I saw Annie Bond staring at the Sunset Kid ten minutes after I had introduced them. She didn't return the Kid's smile, and there was none of his radiance in her look. But something somber and far-away had come into her face that made her seem like someone just born.

I saw Annie Bond and the Sunset Kid four months later. A car bonked at me as I was walking to my hotel in Beverly Hills. The Kid was behind its wheel, and Annie, her hair blowing in the wind, was beside him.

"Come on along," the Kid said. "We're taking a little ride to Santa Monica."

We reached the beach in time. The sun was resting like a red hoop on the horizon. We parked and the Kid watched it, almost as avidly as Annie Bond watched him. Her eyes were wide with love, and the eight Hollywood years were gone from her face.

The last red sliver of the sun dropped out of sight and the Kid smiled. "My lucky piece, I'm going to need it next week. . . . Mind if I tell him, Annie?"

Annie didn't mind. "We're getting married," the Sunset Kid said. "On the fifteenth. Because fifteen is my lucky number. In the morning at ten-thirty. And at nine o'clock that night I'm going into business. Quittin' all my tricks and settling down as a regular citizen."

"He's buying a half interest in The Congo Room," Annie's husky voice was eager. The Congo was one of Hollywood's newest night clubs, complete with name band, low-key lighting and a run of celebrities. "Dan's going to be the manager. And I'm going to sing there."

"In a silver gown with silver slippers," said the Kid. He took her hand and kissed it. "Her name'll be up in lights," he said. "Annie Bond, the Texas Nightingale."

"If I make good," said Annie. "If you've made good," the Kid said softly.

"I'm so dizzy I don't know if I'm comin' or goin'," said Annie. "Imagine something like this happening to me! I don't mean my name in lights. I mean Dan."

"To both of us," Dan smiled. "That's why I'm quittin' the tricks. They used to be the only fun there was. Now they don't mean anything."

I thought of some questions. "Buying in on the Congo is going to require a bank roll, isn't it?"

"Ten grand, cash," he answered.

"Have you got it?" I asked.

"I'm getting it on the fifteenth," the Sunset Kid smiled.

Seven men sat in Rocky Blair's elegant living room. Three of them were bodyguards, three were Rocky's friends and assistants. The seventh was Rocky. Six were in shirt sleeves, collars undone. It was one P.M., June fifteenth, and the day was hot.

Rocky was having his breakfast on a tray. He was fully and resplendently dressed, as became a king, regardless of the hour or temperature. Rocky's empire consisted of five hundred bookies—and several unallied and legal enterprises which he ran as a sort of hobby. Chief among these was the Boulevard Florist Shop in the center of Hollywood. It was in the rear of the rambling, sweet-scented establishment that Rocky had his "home office."

Out of this aromatic chamber Rocky operated his five hundred bookies. For guiding them financially, delivering them out of bondage when the police grew fractious and smoothing their ways with the juices of bribery and corruption in high and low places, Rocky pulled down an average of a hundred thousand dollars each week.

There was no syndicate involved. There was only Rocky, sitting, as he sat this hot day, as the one and only king of the territory between Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

Rocky was a finicky man with a round, tight face that nobody had ever seen unshaven. He had, despite the elegance of his attire, the look of a well-barbered pugilist sitting in his corner between rounds, with motionless, determined eyes, and lips pinched together—and waiting. The posture and expression came naturally to him, for

(Continued on Page 51)

(Continued from Page 51)

he had sat in a ring corner as a pugilist during five of his youthful years.

Rocky sat in silence with his six guests as he drank his coffee. The three bodyguards were mugs with nothing to say. The three assistants, more capable of conversation, specialized in being as tightmouthed as their boss.

A musical gong sounded three times. It was the front doorbell. Rocky continued sipping his coffee and nobody moved. The gong sounded again, and Rocky looked at Gil, the smallest of the bodyguards, but who wore a gun and holster near his left armpit, visible only when his coat was off, as now.

Gil stood up and moved to the front door. Two attempts to wipe out Rocky Blair had been made that month.

The six listened to the outer door open. There were no shots and no bomb came rolling into the room, from which they knew that this was a social call.

Gil re-entered the silent room.

"It's that Moony Dan," he said.

"What's the thief want?"

"To see you, Rocky," said Gil.

"Throw him out," said the fat-faced Tubby Fields, who was considered Rocky's "brains." "Don't waste any time."

"Shut up," said Rocky. Everybody waited a full minute, and then Rocky concluded his speech. "Show the gentleman in."

Gil went into the hallway again and undid the two steel chains on the door. He returned leading the Sunset Kid.

Nobody spoke. Rocky peered out of the living-room window into the street beyond the wide front lawn.

"You got no car," said Rocky.

"I came in a taxi," the Kid said.

"On purpose, eh?" Rocky scowled.

"What the hell for?"

"I felt lucky," the Sunset Kid answered.

All seven men in the room put on the same expression. It was an expression of indifference. And all seven felt the same lift of excitement. The Kid had announced openly that he had come to steal money again from Rocky Blair.

"Throw him out," said Tubby Fields.

Nobody moved and the Kid sat down. Rocky finished his coffee. Anger fumed in his eyes. This monkey had taken him three times—once in a poker game in this same room. With seven guys watching every move of the thief's fingers, and putting a fresh deck of cards into play every fifteen minutes, this trimmer had taken him for twenty-eight hundred dollars. And all in the last pot, which was the way he always worked. You got four kings and he came up with his signature—four aces—and blew.

"I ain't playin' cards," said Rocky.

"Glad to hear it," said the Kid.

"Takes too long to make a killing at cards. Sometimes you have to sit around for hours."

"I make the suggestion a thoid time," said Tubby Fields. "Throw this fella out."

Rocky scowled at his "brains." Usually he followed Tubby's advice. Tubby, he always said, had a "fourth sense." He knew things in advance. But Rocky didn't want to throw the Kid out. It would be a confession of weakness, and besides, how could a thief trim him in his own house with seven guys watching his every move?

"I'm doin' this," Rocky answered Tubby. "So shut up." Turning to his visitor, he added, "What kind of play do you want?"

"I feel lucky on horses today," said the Kid.

All seven in the room, including even Tubby Fields, were glad nobody had thrown the visitor out—because this was going to be something good. The Kid was going to try to pull a "past-post" betting gag on the boss, right under their noses. That was different from pulling it on the lugs behind the bookie counters. All seven remembered, in a minimum of words, the Kid's work as a betting thief. He had made a lot of cleanup placing bets after a race was over, and betting on a horse that had already won. One of the simpler ways he had used was calling up three minutes before a race had started and putting down bets on the race that was going to follow. There was a girl taking the bets. And the Kid would keep on talking to the girl over the phone, telling her some story he had found out, about her sister, and offering to help get the sister out of some trouble she was in. And then, all of a sudden, he would say, "Put five hundred on Sun Up to win in the second." The girl taking the bets would forget to look at the clock because she was excited over the Kid saving her sister, and she would mark down: "Sun Up—\$500—Second Race." And the second race would be already run and over.

The Kid would come around at five to collect his winnings, and the girl would be fired.

There were other tricks the Kid had worked. Rocky remembered them all, including the "invisible-ink" trick. The Kid had handled in a betting slip with the names of three horses on it to win the third, fourth and fifth races. On the slip was also written the name of a horse that had already won the first race. But it was written in invisible ink. The bookie couldn't see it when he filed the betting slip. By five o'clock, when the Kid came around to collect, the invisible ink had "come up" and become visible. And the bookie had to pay off on a horse that had been bet on after he had won the race.

Tubby had figured that one out, but there was no proving it. And you couldn't knock a guy off without catching him guilty. This was the unwritten law in Rocky's kingdom just as it was the written law outside it.

Not only Rocky but all the others here in Rocky's home knew every past-post betting gag that had ever been pulled. And all seven went to work at once. That is, they alerted themselves.

(Continued on Page 56)

(Continued from Page 35)

"Sit over here," said Tubby Fields. He moved the Sunset Kid away from the front window overlooking the wide lawn and arranged his chair so that the visitor's back was to it. There would be no signaling from outside.

Nate, the oldest and wisest bookie among Rocky's retainers, opened the window and looked out. Rocky's house stood in a sparsely built and would-be fashionable neighborhood. There was no house on its immediate left or right. The street was wide and there were no houses of any sort on the opposite side.

Rocky looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was 1:10.

"You got some nag picked?" Rocky asked.

He winked at Tubby, and Tubby winked back. The others also winked at one another.

The Kid looked at the seven men all now openly studying his hands, feet and face. A rueful smile turned his mouth.

"I like Count Monty in the first," he said, "but I haven't made up my mind yet."

"You want a little more time, eh?" Rocky sneered. Count Monty was running at 1:30.

"That's right," said the Kid. "Do you mind if I use your bathroom, Mr. Blair?"

"Go right ahead," said Rocky. "There's one in the hallway."

"Yes, I know," the Kid said. He stood up and started out of the room. At a nod from Rocky, two of his guests also stood up and followed the Kid as far as the bathroom door. They remained outside.

"He ain't gonna try," said Gil, a little regretfully. "You scared him off, Rocky."

"He'll try," said Tubby Fields. "Naw," Rocky grinned coldly. "He was feelin' big when he came in here. He ain't feelin' so big now."

"Too bad," one of the heavy guards said. "We could 'a' caught him."

"He's gonna try," Tubby repeated. "Okay," said Rocky. "Then we'll catch him. I been wantin' to catch that thief a long time."

Inside the bathroom, the Sunset Kid turned the key in the lock and smiled to himself. He knew the talk that was being made in the room he had left. He knew that Tubby Fields was on the telephone getting the right time and setting his watch by it, and the clock on the mantelpiece. One-thirty would be one-thirty in Rocky's living room, the same as it was in the rest of California, including the Santa Anita Race Track.

But the Kid was smiling at something more important going on in the room he had left—its psychology. He knew that at 1:33, one minute after the first race at Santa Anita had been run, Rocky would take his bet—on the horse that had won.

The Kid switched on the electric light over the medicine cabinet, turned on both faucets to cover the sound, and then unscrewed the electric bulb. He sighed as he worked. He was glad this was his last trick—just this one for Annie—nothing else. He removed the tin-foil lining from a package of cigarettes and shaped it into a penny-shaped disk. Placing the tin foil in the socket, he screwed the bulb tightly into place.

There was a faint pop, and the Kid knew a fuse in some basement box had been blown. He unscrewed the bulb again and removed the tin foil. He had knocked out the bathroom current,

and the odds were twenty to one that the adjoining living room was on the same fuse.

If it was, he was "in business." If it wasn't—the Kid shrugged mentally—he would have to dream up another gag. He made a deep wish. "Annie, make it work," he muttered. Then he rinsed his hands quickly, turned off the water and opened the door.

"You're sittin' here," said Tubby Fields as the Kid preceded the bodyguards into the living room. "The same chair."

The Kid sat down. Rocky looked at the clock. It was 1:17.

"You made up your mind yet?" he asked.

"I think I'll skip the first race," the Kid smiled.

The Kid's face stiffened and darkened. "We ain't taking bets after starting time," Tubby Fields said quietly. "Don't try pullin' any."

"Shut up," Rocky said. "I'm concentratin'." His eyes, tense and angry, were on the Kid's face.

"It's one-twenty-five," said Tubby after a long silence.

"Okay," said Rocky, "turn on the radio. We'll catch the first race."

Biggy, one of the guards, stepped to the radio cabinet. Nobody watched him. All eyes remained on the thief.

"No bets after the race starts," said Rocky. "This is your last chance. You want to make a play?"

"I don't feel it," said the Sunset Kid.

"Hell!" Biggy was muttering. "This thing ain't workin'."

Hearing Biggy's words, the Sunset Kid relaxed. He knew he was "in business." The rest was psychology. "What ain't workin'?" Rocky asked irritably.

"The radio," said Biggy. "He's knocked it out."

"Who's knocked it out?" Rocky kept his eyes on the visitor.

"The Kid," said Biggy.

"He ain't touched it," said Rocky firmly. "Get the set out of my bedroom. Hurry up."

Tubby Fields stood up and cried out harshly. "He's done it, I tell ya! The gag is on! Throw him out!"

"He's done nothin'," said Rocky. "I been watchin' him. Shut up now."

Biggy returned with a smaller radio set and plugged it into a light socket.

Rocky looked at the mantelpiece clock. It was 1:30.

"This one don't work either," Biggy growled. "He's busted this one likewise."

The Kid's eyes were on Tubby Fields. He waited for the "brains" to call the shot—a blown fuse. But the "brains" was too busy watching to think. Besides, the Kid was gambling that the theory of fuse boxes was unknown to the assemblage.

"Is the wire out?" one of Rocky's aides asked.

"The wire's okay," said Biggy. "There's somethin' the matter inside. It don't even go on."

Dimly, Rocky was aware that this was a feat of some kind, and he kept his eyes on every flick of the thief's eyes.

"That's too bad," said the Sunset Kid. "I would have liked to hear that race run. I had a hunch on Count Monty. But I'm glad I didn't bet. Because I got a bigger hunch right now, a real feeling. Blue Skies. Care to take a bet on Blue Skies, Mr. Blair?"

Rocky looked at the clock. It was 1:35. The first race had ended a minute ago—if they'd got away quick.

"I'll put three thousand on Blue Skies to win," said the Sunset Kid. "It's no different playing my hunch now than ten minutes ago. You don't know and I don't know what's happened."

As he talked, the Kid removed six five-hundred-dollar bills and put them on the breakfast tray at Rocky's elbow.

"You taking my bet?" he asked. Rocky's hand reached for the money.

"I'm taking that bet," he said.

The room was silent. There had been no signal. The thief had sat in the middle of the room, his back to the street fifty feet beyond. Tubby waddled to the phone and called a number. The room waited for his announcement.

"Tubby Fields," said Tubby huskily into the mouthpiece. "Gimme the results in the first at Santa Anita."

He listened and hung up slowly.

"Blue Skies by a nose," he announced. "Paid seven to two."

"You dirty thief," Rocky said. "You've stole ten grand off me."

"I didn't steal it," said the Sunset Kid softly. "I won it."

"You stole it," Rocky repeated. His hand moved slowly under his coat. He was forgetting the unwritten law.

(Continued on Page 38)

(Continued from Page 36)

"If you want to wish on a bet you took," said the Kid, "go ahead. You don't have to shoot me. You just don't pay off."

Rocky's hand stopped moving. A gambler couldn't do anything against that kind of talk. It was an easy psychology play from here in, and the Kid kept all smugness out of his voice.

"You made the bet after looking at the clock," he said. "But if you feel you've been taken, in your own house, with all your smart pals watching me, you don't have to pay. That's up to you, Mr. Blair."

"I'm payin'," said Rocky.

He took ten thousand-dollar bills out of his wallet.

"I'll give you five more," he said quietly, "if you tell me how you done it."

The Kid smiled at the trap. "I got a feeling all of a sudden," he answered naively. "It came a little late, but it was a genuine feeling."

He took the bills from Rocky's hand and picked up his own three thousand. The others watched and were silent. "You're a lousy thief," said Rocky, without emotion. "You never won an honest nickel in your life. I'm payin' off, because I took the bet with my eyes open. But I'm gonna get the money back. I'm gonna find out what kind of a gag you pulled. And when I find out, I'm comin' after you. And you won't need no money after that."

The Sunset Kid waited patiently for Rocky to finish his long, slow speech.

"I'm sorry you've got that attitude, Mr. Blair," he said. "But thanks for payin' off."

He nodded, added, "So long," and walked slowly out of the room.

Outside in the bright afternoon, the Sunset Kid walked toward a boulevard intersection two blocks distant. As he turned the corner he glanced back to see if anyone had followed him. The blazing street was empty of all life.

Four automobiles were lined up, one behind the other, at the boulevard curb. It was an odd collection of cars. The oddity lay in their coloring. One was black, one bright green, one red, and the fourth was a salmon yellow.

The Sunset Kid thought of the fifth and missing car, the light blue one. He reserved for a moment the thrill of catching a glimpse of it in the mirror over Rocky's mantelpiece, watching the bit of blue flash by. He had even noted in that brief swing across the mirror that Annie's hair was flying and her face grinning. She had flashed by at a good seventy.

The mystification of the seven men and the almost foolish simplicity of the gag kept the Kid grinning as he got into the red car. There had been five horses running in the first race. Each of the different colors of the five cars represented one of the running horses. Annie had sat getting the race over the car radio. As soon as the winner was called, Annie had jumped into the right car—the blue one for Blue Skies.

The Kid drove the red job to the car-rental garage out of which he had taken it three days ago. He returned an hour later to the boulevard curb and the three other rented cars. One by one, he restored them to their widely separated garage headquarters.

It was nearly seven when the Kid had returned the last of the four rentals. He was weary and hot with driving. A quick look at the sky told him he was on schedule. He would be able to get to the beach in Santa Monica in time to

watch the sun go down, with Annie. She would be waiting, parked at their usual front-row seat for the sunset, in the blue car.

There was no blue car parked when the Sunset Kid rolled up to the beach end of the street. He shut off the motor and sat staring at the sun going down.

Annie would drive up any minute. Annie had gone to buy something—a hot dog or sunburn lotion. The sun seemed to take a long time going down. The Kid tried to breathe casually. Annie would show. What were a few minutes of waiting? There was a whole life of Annie ahead now. The Kid turned on the car radio. Time passed faster when music was playing. It was seven-thirty and the Kid hit a news broadcast and let it run.

Suddenly he took his eyes from the setting sun. He closed them and looked at nothing. The newscaster's voice filled the car.

"Los Angeles counted its one hundred and fortieth victim of reckless driving this afternoon. A car speeding along at seventy miles an hour down a Brentwood residential street crashed into a parked delivery truck. The driver of the car was killed instantly. Her name was Annie Bond, a young and beautiful café singer known as the Texas Nightingale."

When the Sunset Kid opened his eyes, the Pacific was dark. His hands were shaking and he couldn't move his legs to start the car. He laid his head on the wheel and cried.

Three days later, the Sunset Kid walked into Rocky Blair's Boulevard Flower Shop. A heavy-set colored man with a cauliflower ear was behind the main counter. He stared at the Kid and said nothing.

Biggy looked up from a picture magazine he was reading. He also said nothing, but walked to a door at the rear of the flower shop. He pressed a button three times. The heavy steel door opened.

"That fella's here," said Biggy. "That Moony Dan."

Rocky Blair came out, followed by Tubby Fields. Rocky went behind the flower counter. Biggy and Tubby took a place on each side of the Kid.

"I read about your girl," said Rocky. "She was killed in an accident after drivin' a blue car past my house. Around one-thirty."

The Kid nodded.

"I been lookin' for you," said Rocky. He stared at the white face and the bloodshot eyes in front of him and asked harshly, "What do you want?"

"I want to buy some flowers," the Kid said.

"We're wastin' time," said Tubby. "Take him into the office, Biggy."

"Shut up," Rocky scowled. "I'm waitin' on a customer. . . . What kind o' flowers do you want, Kid?"

"Roses," said the Sunset Kid. "I want fifteen dollars' worth of roses sent every week to Miss Annie Bond. She's buried in Forest Lawn. I want the roses put on her grave every week for the next fifteen years. That'll be about ten grand. And seven hundred extra. I'm paying in advance."

The Kid put ten one-thousand dollar bills on the counter and added another seven hundred.

"That'll cover it," he said. "And if you sell the business or anything happens, I'd like to fix it so the delivery keeps on."

Rocky Blair looked at the shaking hands and the bleared eyes in front of the counter.

"Mr. Fields will enter your order," said Rocky stiffly. "The flowers will be delivered as specified." He paused, scowled and added, "Take care of the man, Tubby, and give him a receipt." And Rocky walked back into his steel-doored office.

When I go to the Santa Monica beach, I stop in at an oyster bar that faces the ocean. It's a small and rather sloppy place, and the sea food is none too good. But I go there for a meal now and then because Dan Flato waits on me. He used to be called the Sunset Kid.

His hands are still shaking and his eyes have kept the heavy look that came to them one time when he watched the sun go down. But the Kid doesn't watch the sun any more. He has a new hobby. When he waits on me his eyes look across the counter toward the street end where Annie Bond was going to meet him—that time. THE END