

Rhapsody

by Joseph Patrick Lee

"Who was that lady I saw you dancing with recently at Discotheque Mon Amie? Your wife?"

"I'm not married and that woman was no ordinary lady."

"Really! You sure looked like you were dancing. What were you doing?"

"We were wrestling. She had a gun and was going to kill me. I was trying to get the gun away from her. It was a Model No. 34, Smith and Wesson, .22 caliber. One of those kit guns popular with assassins here on the West Coast. It doesn't make a loud bang, like a .357 Magnum. My friend Mel, who is an expert on guns, told me all about this model. Almost all professional assassins leave the gun at the scene so it won't be found with them. The grip is scored and fingerprints can't be taken from the handle."

"Wow! That's exciting. Why was she going to kill you? Did you know her?"

"Never saw her until the moment before she pulled the gun and pointed it at me. I was short-cutting across the dance-floor among the dancers when she walked toward me, smiling. I thought she was going to ask me to dance. Then out came the gun. It's a good thing the finish was nickel, instead of blue, or I might not have seen it in time."

"Crazy! Weren't you scared?"

"I didn't have time. I just reacted, grabbed her, and managed to take the gun away from her. Then I had the upper hand with her. I shoved the gun in her ribs, gently of course, since she was a lady, and waltzed her off the dance-floor into the lounge. I needed a drink and so did she."

"Of course! That was cool, man. What happened then?"

"We sat in a booth. I held the gun pointed at her tummy under the table. She was rather flustered. She was quite pretty, I thought, about 35, smartly dressed in a basic black suit, wearing her titian hair in a bouffant style that framed her face quite nicely. To the casual observer, we were a very attractive couple, out on a date."

"Really! A good looker and she was going to kill you. Why?"

"We ordered a frozen daiquiri for her and a double shot of George Benz Sons Blue Ribbon 100 proof bourbon whiskey for me. When we had finished the first drink and had started on the second, I asked her why she pointed the gun at me, a stranger. Strictly business, she said. She was hired to kill me. On a contract."

"Hey, man! Do you have enemies like that? It ain't safe to be with you! I'm getting out of here!"

"Calm down. You're safe now. Let me tell the rest of the story. We were having the third drink when I asked her who hired her to kill me. She said she didn't know. She had a long distance telephone call from a guy named Ace Kingqueen. That's probably a nom de plume, or something. It is certainly not his real name. He wanted her husband, Ollie, to take care of me. The usual way, like Ollie always did. With finesse. Clean."

"Fantastic! Just like that. Pretty wild, I say."

"As we talked and I asked her questions, she loosened up somewhat. The drinks helped, I think. I asked her how come she was doing this sort of thing for a living. Killing people, that is."

"Wowsiel! She's a shootist. For hire. And a good looking redhead, too. I thought all hitters were swarthy faced greaseballs with cauliflower ears and broken noses. I never heard of a good-looking lady taking up the hit business."

"Hitlady"

Ollie to do another snuff-job for him. Gertie told Ace that Ollie was dead, and that she knew all about the kind of work her husband had done for him. She asked him to let her continue in her husband's business, as so many wives do nowadays. Ace was reluctant, at first, but when she told him she needed the money to maintain her life-style and keep the girls in Emma Willard's School for Girls, which is quite expensive, he was sympathetic and agreed. That's how he came to give her my name."

"That's wild! You were going to be her first hit and she muffed it. What's Ace going to say about that?"

"Let me get on with my story. Gertie and I were having those drinks and she was getting a little smashed and scared that she wouldn't get paid for killing me. I asked her did Ace care about how I died just so she had a hand in it and what proof Ace would want

move in with me while we worked on the project."

"Sexy, sexy, earthy, earthy! You were taking a big chance weren't you? One minute she's going to kill you and the next she's moving in with you. What made you do a dumb thing like that?"

"Chemistry, my man! The more I talked with Gertie, the more I became emotionally involved. Here was a damsel in distress, a sensitive, good-looking damsel in distress, who needed a knight in shining armor like me. It was so natural I just did it. No questions."

"Jehosaphat! I couldn't do that for love or money. But then I'm sure you think different than I do. I lead a rather ordinary life. My excitement comes from watching people dance and having fun. Discotheque Mon Amie is

'Murder, She Wrote' on TV with us at the time the coroner said he had died.

Then they put out the story that he had choked to death accidentally."

"Amazing! Synchronicity and coincidence wrapped into one! What did you do then?"

"Gertie and I managed to get a copy of the coroner's report in which foul play was hinted. That was enough for her to let Ace know she had taken care of the assignment. He was satisfied and paid her the 100 C's according to the contract."

"Ho, ho, ho! And Gertie didn't have to do a thing. But what puzzles me is this: Did the right John Smith get hit?"

"That's the amazing part of the story. John Smith had been a witness to a murder three years before. He had testified in court convincingly enough to send a Mafia god-father type to the prison in Attica, New York. The Mafia man didn't like the idea of spending the rest of his life in that place. He told his Cosa Nostra friends to avenge him. We found out that Ace Kingqueen is in charge of contracts for the mob. You might say he is a hit-broker. So that is why Gertie got the John Smith contract. Incidentally, John Smith's real name was Anthony Prosaic. He was a parking lot attendant in Brooklyn when he witnessed the murder. After he testified, the FBI gave him a new identity and relocated him and Alice here in Portland. How the Mafia found out John Smith was the Anthony Prosaic they wanted, we'll never know. We assume they had a mole in the Bureau."

"What a story! What happens now? Does Gertie get out of the business? What are you going to do about her?"

"You sure ask a lot of questions. But that's all right. Gertie is still living with me in the high-rise at 12th and Clay. We are consoling our friend Alice Smith and helping her arrange her affairs. Her husband left her well off with insurance money and Gertie's 100 grand is helping them put together a little business: a boutique in the Galleria. They are having a ball, being creative and businesslike. As for me, I just go around selling siding."

"That's great! One last thing. One last question. What happened to the Smith and Wesson, Model No. 34?"

"Oh, that. The gun is in the top drawer of Gertie's desk. It has become an in-joke and a good luck symbol around the boutique. You see Gertie's maiden name was Wesson so she and Alice call their business, BOUTIQUE SMITH AND WESSON, HIGH CALIBER GIFTS FOR BIG AND LITTLE SHOTS."

"Wow!"



"Neither had I. So I asked her how she had chosen hitting as a career. She said her husband, Ollie, had been one of the best in the business until he got killed in a car accident. Some kid driving while drunk crossed over the line and hit his car head-on."

"During his years as the best hit-man in the business, Ollie had commanded high fees for his work. He averaged three or four hits a month and was making over a million a year. Their life-style was commensurate

with that kind of money. He paid very little taxes. He reported to the IRS only on income he earned writing for magazines like 'Sports Afield' and 'Field and Stream.' His travel expenses were high, gathering information for the articles and stories he wrote. They maintained an apartment in Chicago and a chalet in Vail, Colorado. He liked to ski, fish, and hunt. He could write well and wrote about his hobbies as a cover for his real business."

"Far out! A double life and both very interesting. But tell me more. How did she get into the business?"

"When Ollie was killed in the accident, this guy Ace Kingqueen didn't know about it, or make a connection. Gertie, that's her name, got the call from Ace who wanted

that the job had been done. She said Ollie always sent the local newspaper story and obit to a maildrop in an envelope addressed to Ace Kingqueen, P.O. Box No. 69, Olean, New York. She had planned on sending my obit and story when it appeared 'The Oregonian.'"

"God almighty! That's complicated. I presume she'll now have to work a plan to fake your death and put the notice in the paper. But wouldn't 'The Oregonian' require proof, like a death certificate, and a coroner's report, in case of murder or accident? How the hell did you and Gertie work that out?"

"By the application of imagination, liberally lathered with genius and luck. I questioned Gertie carefully about the instructions Ace had given her. He told her I was living in Portland and gave her my address and a general idea of what I looked like. He said I was semi-retired. The name he had given her over the phone was a very common one, which is what my name is: John Smith. As you know, there are lots of John Smiths in the greater Portland phone book. Gertie and I decided to check them out, one by one, until we found a John Smith who fit the other pieces of information Ace had given her. This was going to take time, so I suggested she

my idea of fun. That's how come I saw you and Gertie out there on the dance floor. And now you're telling this exciting story. Please, tell me more. How did your investigations go?"

"I live in a high-rise at 12th and Clay, Clay Towers. As luck would have it, we discovered that there were four John Smiths, including me in the building. I didn't know the others, but I did discover that one of them bore a vague resemblance to me. He was dying of cancer and wasn't expected to live very long. Gertie and I got to know Alice Smith, John's wife, offering sympathy and comforting her in any way we could. She was distraught over his suffering and told us that she believed in euthanasia and had thought of smothering him with a pillow like she had seen the lover do to his sick sweetheart in 'Betty Blue.' That's the French film playing at KOIN Theatre down the street from Clay Towers. We agreed that John Smith would be better off dying quickly than hanging on and on. We must have been pretty convincing because the next day he was dead. At first the police suspected foul play, and were going to make a case of it. Then they decided it would cost Portland a lot of money. They half-suspected Alice, but we provided her with a good alibi by saying she was watching

