

The better samaritan

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THE BETTER SAMARITAN

«Hiya,» I said, and shook hands with him. Even that was a kind of ritual which he had picked up during the three years he had lived in France, a short sharp snap of greeting. «Come in.»

Pete looked extraordinarily good. He wore a leather jacket and jeans, tight as all get out, and his crop-headed black crew-cut, a flat-top, seemed to give him a white spot on the crown, although he was not losing his hair at all. At twenty-six, few do. He shrugged out of his jacket and sat down in my own favorite relaxing chair. The red flannel shirt, plaid, was a spot of color in the room.

«I got to talk to you,» he said, looking out at the sunny cool San Francisco afternoon.

«Why not?» I murmured. I was the big ear, the confessor, the adviser. I hardly knew why people told me their troubles, but they did, as if I were a bartender. «Want a drink?»

«You got any gin?» he asked. I nodded. «On the rocks,» he said.

I got him his drink.

He lay back in the chair, his long legs ending in booted and buckled feet, and took a swig of it.

«I don't know where or when it all began,» he said slowly. «Maybe the time the drunken young sailor broke my front door glass, falling through it.»

Pete had an antique shop in Oakland. «You told me the night-beat cops boarded it up with cartons,» I said, «after going inside to get some nails.»

«Yeah.» He swirled the drink for a moment. «Then they tucked the hammer back under the cardboard.» He laughed shortly. «Jesus, glass all over the place! Very discouragin'.»

«The sailor paid for it though, didn't he?» I said.

«Yeah. The S.P's brought him around. He was on the way to Vietnam and had just got his first-class bos'un's stripes—which he lost because of that little adventure. But I didn't make any charges against him. He was too handsome, and in enough trouble as it was.»

«The sailor paid for it though, didn't he?» I said.

«Not a gahdamned thing,» Pete said. He uncrossed his legs. «I looked all around. But you know I got a daybed back of the fake wall, where I take a snooze when there's no customers.»

«Yes,» I said.

«I never thought to look at that until about four in the afternoon,» he said. «And lord, what a mess! The black cover was all rumbled up, and the pillow on the floor. I decided that one of the cops had screwed a whore he'd found out on Telegraph Avenue, taking advantage of the broken door.»

«Possibly.»

«Plenty of chances,» he said. «The street's full of 'em. But then I straightened out the black cover and guess what I found at the end of it, as if someone had been sitting on the corner with his legs spraddled wide.»

«No idea,» I said.

Pete laughed, somewhat bitterly.

«The little pearly snailtracks,» he said. «The little opal streaks, all dried by then, of course. So I got real interested. The floor was dusty back there. I got a flashlight and some kleenex and did a little swabbing. Right in the area where someone would have been kneeling—no dust. All around that spot—very dusty.»

«Well,» I said. «Even the cops gotta have their fun.»

«That wasn't the all of it,» Pete said. «I got real hung up on who they were, Wanted to see 'em. I called the inspector and said I'd like to thank them personally, but he said that since they were on the graveyard shift from midnight to morning, and I closed at six, there'd be little chance. Besides, he didn't know

offhand who they were. Then I remembered that a lotta cops hung out around the beanery down the way, and I took a note there and left it for the two that had fixed the door. Then I bought two fifths of bourbon to gice them. But they never showed at all . . .»

«A fine story,» I said.

«That may have been the beginning of it,» Pete said slowly. «but maybe not. Why in the hell should I like cops so much in the first place?»

«You ought to know the answer to that,» I said. Pete was a psychic masochist. «They are the ultimate symbol of authority for a civilian. And they are also the Enemy. Combine the two and what've you got?»

«A compulsion, a danger. Something that appeals to me more than anything else,» Pete said. «Or a fetish. No, not that. A fetish is something inanimate, isn't it?»

«Usually,» I said. «You like the cop as an authority symbol, and you like him also because of the element of risk involved. And perhaps—well, a feather in your hat to have one.»

He took a long drink from the cold gin glass. «Maybe that was the beginning,» he said, «and maybe not. About a month later Mike Hunt—you know him?—brought me a second-hand cop's cap to add to my collection of hats. A real one, he'd found in a pawn shop. Of course, no badge on it. I phoned one up out of a 'Special Police' silver star that anyone can buy. And now that cap's got the place of honor in the row I've got across my bedroom wall.»

«There's your fetish,» I said. «And it's charmed your nightly dreams for a long time, I suppose.»

«My . . . fantasies,» Pete agreed. «I smelled it. It was great. I dreamed of the handsome young one who wore it—black-haired, demanding.»

I sighed. «Are you sure he wasn't old and grey and fat?»

Pete looked shocked. «He couldn't have been!» he exploded. «His . . . his head was too small!»

I shrugged.

«I oughta hit you,» Pete said. But he was grinning.

«It's not in your nature,» I said.

«Well, anyway,» Pete went on. «About a week later Mike Hunt came to see me with a wild story. Seems there's a queen in San Francisco who found a diner in Oakland, one of those little short-counter things made out of an old railroad car, and called 'The Wonderland'.»

«Fancy, that,» I said. «It could happen only in Oakland.»

«Yeah. And it's got a real swingin' gal working behind the counter, a black-haired beanpole named Alice.»

«You don't mean it!» I exploded. «Not Alice in Wonderland!»

«Yeah,» he said. «Lewis Carroll would be whirlin' in his grave. It seems like she gets a bang out of arranging things for cops and queers. She knows several of both. She fixed things up for this queer named Conrad and two or three others who like to play around. One of the cops was named Brian and he drives a paddy-wagon.»

«Instant sex inside,» I said. «He can just pull to the curb and take someone in the back end. That's very convenient.»

«Well,» said Pete, «here's my problem. I've been over to that gahdamn diner about twelve times, eating things I don't want at all, and I can't even begin to get next to Alice. Besides, everything you say in that place everybody else can hear. I just don't know how to do it.»

«And Mike won't help?» I asked.

«He doesn't see how he can, unless he goes in there with Conrad some night.»

«Why not get Mike to introduce you and Conrad, and then you two could go in together?»

Pete thought a moment. «That's an idea,» he said. «Except maybe Mike would not. I think he wants the cops for himself. But not to do what I want to do. With him it's not desire—it's only a thirst for conquest.» He rubbed his chin. «Keerist, I've never worked so hard in my life tryin' to get something I wanted.»

«Pity you can't advertise on the police bulletin board,» I said.

«Of course, I had three cops in Chicago,» Pete said, ignoring me. «Well, really, one was from Milwaukee. So I guess it really didn't begin in Oakland. They were all real fine.»

Then he simply sat and said nothing for quite a while. I had a little fire in the grate, because the afternoon was deceptive, as so often is the case in San Francisco, where the wind is chill. I wondered what wild opal-streaked fantasies were chasing themselves through the deep valleys of his brain.

Pete was a good guy, and he looked very butch—one of those fraternity-type American boys with a square rugged face, and good coloring. No one would have taken him for a club-member, and that was perhaps the source of his major frustrations. Say what you will about the swishes: at least there's no doubt in anyone's mind what they are and what they want—and for that reason they get so much so easily. But hidden under that healthy exterior of his was a personality that could hardly face life without making a chemical adjustment to it, you might say. Unable to change the reality surrounding him, he altered his view of it chemically. There was nothing he had not tried—the amphetamines, the barbiturates, the trips with acid, and finally—finding none of them as easily available as alcohol—landing on the grape as a means of concealing the acne on the dirty face of reality.

On his days off he dressed, and looked, like a construction worker. Odd to think of his having an antique shop and knowing about milk-glass, Duncan Phyfe furniture, vaseline glass, Meissen china, and early American artifacts. At work he wore Ivy League suits and narrow neckties and skinny Italian shoes. Even his voice changed in his free hours, from a hippity-hop British inflection to the deep-toned ungrammatical speech he always used with me. A divided personality, Pete was—cleft from top to bottom.

«Well,» I said, after the silence grew long. «I guess I can't help you much, Pete ole buddy. I don't know this Conrad. And of course you can't just talk to Alice directly about him. She'd freeze and be scared to death. But I'll go asking around our grand Mafia and see if there's anything I can do or learn.»

«Okay,» said Pete. «And thanks.» He drained his glass.

«Another?» I said.

He shook his head. «Nope, kiddo,» he said. «I'm just right. I think I'll go out and cruise in Golden Gate Park for a while. Might be something hanging around somewhere. So long.»

He stood up, and we went through the little French ritual again of a short snappy handshake. Then he went down the steps and headed for the Park, whistling.

*

Of course there was one thing Pete didn't know, and I hadn't told him. I liked the same kind of thing he did, cops, and while he was telling me all about Alice I had my tape-recorder on in my head, getting every word of it down. And what was it with me and the cops—guilt and punishment? Sometimes I wondered if I weren't equally as sick as Pete was.

That was Thursday, and Alice had only two days off, Monday and Tuesday. I waited until dusk, when the high fog came in from the bay to make a dark golden halo over the red and green jewels of the city lights, and then I put on my old clothes. I even put a discreet little dark ruby ear-ring, the post kind (Woolworth's best: 77 cents), in my left ear, the one that had been pierced

during my Navy days. Then I went out and crawled into my little black beetle of a car, and headed for Oak Street and the Bay Bridge. I hated the trip over to Oakland because you could never see over the guard rail, being so low-placed in a Volkswagen.

And I hated Oakland as much as I had ever disliked any place in the world, dumpy little Oakland, the down-at-the-heels hausfrau of cities, afflicted with delusions of grandeur, jealous as hell of the glitter and charm of the magic city of San Francisco across the bay, and peopled with 'loloobs'—which was a word I had coined from the initial letters of 'Little Old Ladies of Oakland-Berkeley'.

There was no trouble finding the Wonderland. I just looked in the phone book, and worked my way to it through the complicated cowpath one-way and wheel-spoked arrangement of the streets.

Damn, the place looked like the outside of police headquarters! There were three squadcars parked in front of it, and a paddy-wagon across the street. I got the beetle into an empty space and looked across into the diner. You could see everything. There was the tall black-haired waitress talking with animation to four cops—three young ones and a grey-haired one.

My heart was beating heavily and my mouth was very dry, but I crossed the street and went into the diner. There weren't any other 'civilian' customers. As I opened the door, the five heads turned in my direction, and the talk stopped suddenly. It was like making a first visit to a neighborhood bar, where you're a stranger. Then Alice laughed, and finished the end of a sentence to a young muscular cop, and I sat down—two stools away, but with the ear-ring next to them.

Alice came and stood before me, her pad in hand. She was a handsome tall woman about thirty-five, with a black bouffant hairdo, heavily sprayed. There was a silver streak in her hair, from front to back. She looked as if she'd been around a lot.

«What'll you have?» she asked, and smiled. I watched her eye fasten briefly on my left ear.

I looked at the «menu» posted behind the counter. «Hamburger,» I said. «No onions.»

«Okay,» she said and went down the aisle towards the grill.

The cops were talking about a new schedule change which they didn't like. Then the one sitting two stools away, the blond crewcut muscular one with his cap pushed to the back of his head, withdrew from the conversation and turned to me and said,

«In need of nourishment, huh?» It was the kind of bait-remark that a person makes to see if the newcomer is disposed to be friendly. I decided to take full advantage of it. I gave him a wide good grin and looked at him, beginning at the peak of his cap, slowly taking in his face, looking at his broad shoulders in the dark blue coat, and then I deliberately let my eyes fall down to his crotch where they hesitated just a flickering moment.

«Yeah,» I said slowly. «In more ways than one.»

He got it. His eyes narrowed a little but he did not stop grinning. Then he leaned a little closer to me and lowered his tone. «I know it's none of my business,» he said, «and you can tell me to go chase myself if it's outa line, but I'd like to ask you a question.»

My heart chugged. «Shoot,» I said, as calmly as I could.

«Well, it's this: why you wear the ear-ring?»

That wasn't the question I'd expected. A crazy impulse came over me, and I wondered what he'd do if I said «Because I'm queer.» But I didn't. I shrugged. «Old days in the Navy,» I said. «If you get a sub sunk under you, it's tradition. Everyone gets an ear pierced, from the commander down.» That was a lot of

bullshit, of course; I hadn't had a sub sunk under me. But I hadn't really said I had.

«I didn't know that,» he said. «Me, I was in the Marines.» Then he looked at the ear-ring again. «I kinda like it,» he said. «Is it a real ruby?»

«Yes,» I said. The hamburger arrived and I reached for the salt.

«My name's Brian,» he said. «I drive the paddy-wagon parked across the street.»

Just then the older grey-haired cop got up. «Well, I'll see you boys later,» he said. «Gotta get goin'.»

They all said goodbye to him. The other two weren't bad—one lanky, one husky, both about six feet. Then Brian turned back to me. He was definitely on the make.

«Paddy-wagon?» I said. «I guess I'm lucky. I never saw the inside of one.»

He laughed, and slid over one stool more. And then in a low tone which the others couldn't hear, he said, «Maybe you'd like to?» At the same time, his hand slipped down to the inside of his crotch, and he cupped himself in a natural male gesture.

I had known terror in my life and experienced panic, but I think that nothing I had ever felt before was as intense and frightening as that moment. I felt the sweat explode in my armpits and on my forehead, and my hands started to tremble. All of the tales of entrapment that I had ever heard crowded into my mind, of blackmail and shakedown—and a prison term at the end of it all. In that wild and terrifying instant my right leg started to jiggle uncontrollably. I had to move it from the rung of the stool and place it flat on the floor to stop it. Suddenly I cursed myself for this piece of incredible foolishness, for being so turned on by Pete's stories that I would dare to jeopardize my freedom, my life up to then. And the only thing standing between me and disaster was one thin line of gossip—Pete's naming of the cop, and his saying that he drove the paddy-wagon, and the black-haired gal named Alice. And all that information was secondhand.

For those three seconds—prolonged until they seemed ten minutes long—I could do nothing except quiver inwardly and sweat. And then the control that had left me returned as quickly as it had disappeared. I took another tentative bite of my hamburger and then put it down unfinished. My appetite was gone.

«Why not?» I said, and moved my shoulder a little. I wiped my fingers, pressing them hard against each other through the napkin to control their unsteadiness. I left the money on the counter.

The cop turned to the other two. «I'm gonna go up to Grand and Telegraph,» he said. «I'll be parked on the usual corner.»

One of them said, «So long, Brian,» and then my cop went out into the night and I followed him. We crossed the street to the paddy-wagon.

«You get in the back,» he said in a low tone. «You're not allowed to ride up front with me.»

«I th-thought you were j-just gonna *show* me the inside,» I said. The fear began to return. Once I was inside, what would happen? Would the door open next on the bright lights of police headquarters? My stomach was knotted tight. I thought the half-hamburger might come up.

Brian looked at me. «You're scared,» he said, almost savagely. «You think I'm gonna arrest you . . .»

«I—well . . .»

«Lissen,» he said, and grabbed my arm right. «Nothin's wrong, I got your number, yes—but—well, for crissake, us cops are human too, ain't we?»

I started to laugh a little, and choked on it. «I—d-don't know,» I said. I felt a cold hand laid at the base of my spine.

Brian laughed, short and hard. «You treat me right, I treat you right,» he said. «You got a thing for cops, aintcha?»

All I could do was nod. My throat was clamped shut.

He doubled up his fist and gave me a buddy-poke on the shoulder. «Relax,» he said. «You're white as a sheet, Mac.»

I swallowed hard, but nothing would relieve the dryness of my mouth. He stepped up on the jump-step and unlocked the door, opening one half of it on to a black pit.

Once before in my life I felt completely alone, when—only half-aware, dopey with sedation—I had been wheeled on the mobile table into the brilliantly lighted theatre for an operation on my kneecap. There was no one to hold my hand, and only the unfocused blur of faces bending over me. It was terror I knew them, the terror of being all alone—and the same kind of terror took me now. But this was no antiseptically lighted operating room in a hospital, glaring with fluorescents. It was rather the black hole of Calcutta. I saw the benches on each side, the high grated small openings in the rear doors, the wire-covered ones that gave on to the driver's seat.

«Come on, man!» Brian whispered violently. «Up and in! You want somebody should see us?»

I stepped up the two steps, and he closed and locked the door behind me. There was no light at all except the dimness filtering through the small barred opening from the street lights outside. I felt my way to a side bench and sat down trembling. There was a stale odor of dirty male bodies, and leather from the seats, and dust from the floor. The paddy-wagons of Oakland were not overly clean.

I heard Brian get in and shut the front door. I saw the back of his cap through the grating. «Okay?» he said, half-turning his handsome face, profiled against the streetlight.

«Y-yeah,» I managed to say. He started the engine. And then half-crouching I got up from the bench and looked out the back grating. He was turning north, not south—heading (I hoped) for Grand and Telegraph. The police station was at Fourth and Broadway, south. At least that was some relief.

I don't know whether it was the shortest or the longest ride I ever took. The sins of my past life, as they are reputed to do when you're drowning, flashed, flickered, fluttered through my brain—the dramas I had created back in my drinking days, the time I broke Emmy's finger in a fit of rage, the time I slapped my sister, the time I had my jaw broken in an alley—all the horror of the past. And then lingeringly there came over me a great flood of regret for the things left undone, and unaccomplished, leaving me in a deep depression, almost on the verge of tears. My eyes stung.

The paddy-wagon stopped. I looked out the grating. It was a lonely parking lot. Brian turned off the motor, and I began to feel a little better. I heard him unlocking the door. He came in and closed it behind him.

«It's okay here,» he said.

«Won't somebody come up and look through the windows?» I said, still uncertain.

He laughed that short sharp hard laugh of his again. «Are you kiddin'?» he said. «The citizens stay as far away from the paddy-wagons as they can. They wouldn't dare come nosin' around.»

In the half-light I saw him fumbling with his belt. He took off his jacket. The black line of the Sam Browne strap sliced diagonally across his shoulder. His black leather holster gleamed dully in the shadows, and the handcuffs hanging from his belt were brighter. He lifted one of them in his hand. «You want I should chain you to the wall?» he said. The tone of his voice was somber.

«N-not n-necessary,» I said. I sank to my knees on the floor of the paddy-wagon.

Without saying anything, he sat down on the side bench and stripped off his trousers. I sensed a change in his mood; it was no longer that of the hunter hot with the lust of his quarry. In the blue-black darkness, I saw the line of his shoulder strap unhooked, no longer diagonal, hanging straight down to one side. Timidly, still fearful, I put my hand out and laid it on his boot. He drew a deep ragged breath, and I saw his handsome face turn down towards me.

«So you like cops,» he said. His voice was tired. Suddenly he leaned forward and put his face in his hands, his elbows on his knees. It was not a ragged breath this time. It was almost a sob, changed in mid-course to a clearing of his throat, as if he feared the destruction of his image.

«Christ,» he muttered. «Why can't anyone treat me like a human being?»

I felt my chest contract in the sudden agony that the victim of a heart-attack must feel. And then, projected upon the screen of what empathy I had, I saw his life—filled with the ones who toadied to him, who sought his favors and fawned upon his badge. I felt the hot belligerent wind of hate springing from the eyes of those who despised the uniform he wore. I listened with him to the unending whining complaints and faced with him the nasty little dramas of his life, from screaming pursuit through dangerous midnights to the curl of the lip on the housewife's face as he gave her a parking ticket. I heard the blustering threats of the politicians, and knew the coventry his neighbors placed him in. I saw the thousand little pleasures his status denied him—a glass of beer in the neighborhood tavern, happily anonymous like any other man, without the stigma of the whispered «He's a cop. Be careful.» And I ached with my own selfishness and grew half-sick of my lust for him.

He sighed and stood up. In the shadowed dark the dull-gleaming whiteness of his legs was like that of the birch trees growing in the wild woods of my childhood (so far away, so innocent!), and like a child forsaken in the jungle of life, I put my arms around them as I used to on grandfather's farm, and hugged them close. And then, killing the «Officer . . .» that sprang to my lips, I looked upwards in the darkness and said, so low that I could hardly hear it myself,

«Br-Brian, I . . . think you're—just a human being. I like you . . . as a man.»

And then I began what was expected of me, and what I wanted and had to do.

*

He had put himself back in order. «Was it okay?» he said.

«The best, man,» I said, smiling in the darkness.

«Again?» he said. We stood facing each other.

«Any time,» I said.

«How I get in touch with you?» he said.

Thinking fast, I changed the plan I had formed before. I had intended to be the Good Samaritan, to give him Pete's name and address on Telegraph Avenue, and then tell Pete of the generous gift I was giving him. But now I saw how to be a better Samaritan.

I pulled a pad from my pocket, and in the dark, without seeing, feeling only the tip of the pencil against the paper, I wrote my name and address for him, and my telephone number. Then I tore the leaf off and handed it to him, folded into a small square.

«I live in San Francisco,» I said. «Call me when you can make it.»

«Thanks, buddy,» he said. He took out his wallet and stuck the paper in it.
«And . . . Brian,» I said.
« . . . ?»
«Brian,» I said, liking the sound of his name. «You don't . . . have to come in uniform.»
Of all the treasured gestures of my life, I think I remember best the feel of his strong square hand on my shoulder, and its grip—as if he never wanted to let me go.

© 1966 by Thomas Cave



Lest you be angry with me, I will talk
Of other things: the weather, or the gold
Of sunlight littering the garden walk.
The taste of oranges; the bitter cold
Of ale upon the tongue; the majesty
Of redwoods rising in cathedral groves;
The many moods that move the purple sea;
Of pirate's maps locating treasure troves.

All these and other things I will explore
With wit and learning or with subtle jest.
If there be subjects which would please you more
I would be glad to honor your request . . .
In manly tones or softly as a dove:
No matter what I say, I speak of Love!

by James Ramp



THIS HAPPENED IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY...

From The New York Times, Internat. Edition, Paris we quote:

Homosexual is executed by Yemen in public

SANA, Yemen, Aug. 1 (AP)—A man condemned for homosexual offenses was executed before 6,000 persons in the main square of Sana today.

A religious court had sentenced Ahmed El-Osamy, 60-years-old municipal employe.

Islamic law demands a man convicted of homosexuality be thrown from the highest point in the city. But the court said El-Osamy could be beheaded instead.

When the appointed hour arrived, the official executioner did not show up. After waiting 20 minutes, a religious judge asked the condemned man if he would consent to being shot.

El Osamy nodded affirmatively, and a police officer emptied his eight-shot revolver into his head.

The Minister of Education, Mohamed el-Khalidy, who was present at the execution, subsequently explained that the man had not only been guilty of homosexual conduct but had actually been the leader of a group of such men. Khalidy stated that it had been originally intended to throw the convicted man from an aircraft. This procedure was then rejected as being too expensive.