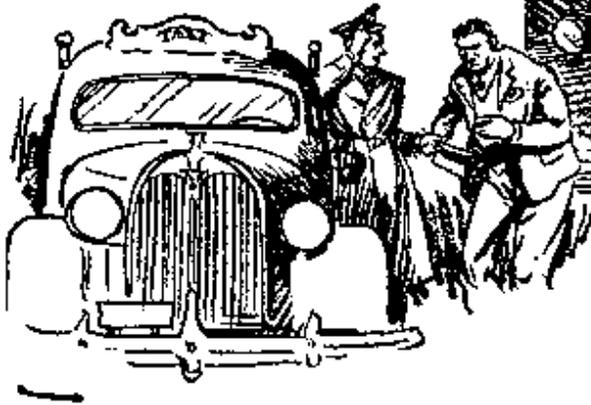


Playboy

By Samuel Taylor

Author of "The Girl From Yesterday," etc.



"Wrong, Heads, you lose"

*And all our yesterdays have lighted
fools the way to dusty death—
Shakespeare*

CHICK Carlson was loafing around town looking for something to turn up and he dropped into the Wagon Wheel tavern on Market Street to take in a beer and a couple of so-called cowboy tunes from the orchestra on the elevated stand above the bar. The flat-faced taxi driver drifted in and sat on the other side of the small table and started grouching about his job.

It was as simple and casual as that.

The taxi hawk had a face that looked like it had been used for a doormat. The nose was wide and flat, and little white scar lines ran around the lips and through the eyebrows. But at that it was a good-natured face.

"You know, I've never driven a taxi," Chick Carlson said, and at the moment he felt cheated.

"No? Well, you ain't missed nothing."

"Maybe. Maybe I have," Chick Carlson said. In fact, the more he thought of it the more he was sure that life just wouldn't be worth living unless he drove a taxi tonight. He got out a ten dollar bill and then another, and said, "Look, I'd like to drive your taxi for a spell."

"Ye-ah? And why?" the hacker said.

Carlson grinned. He had a nice grin. "Why did I smuggle a milk wagon horse into my apartment?

Why did I pinch hit for a wrestler? Why did I bet that I could steal the bell off a fire engine? Why—"

"Oh, a playboy, is it?" the flat-faced man said.

Carlson put a five atop the two tens.

"Okay," the driver said. "But get back before this joint closes, or I report the car swiped. See?"

Wearing the flat-faced man's cap, Chick Carlson drove the taxi around. It was an independent cab, and the name on the license certificate was J. A. Smith. A name common enough to remember. He got a small kick out of being polite, giving profuse thanks for a ten-cent tip. There was a pair of lovers to see the city lights from Telegraph Hill; a salesman to the Third and Townsend station; a fat lady giving her Pekinese the air. Then a couple of guys wanted to be taken to a hot spot, and Chick Carlson headed toward the Tongan Village, off El Camino Real south of the city.

THE two guys got out at the Tongan Village, and "Heads" Morgan came out of the casino and hailed the cab. Carlson knew Heads Morgan by sight—had seen him at Tanforan and Baden, at Dreamland and at the night spots. Everybody who went around got to know Heads Morgan. Morgan

always dressed with an immaculate flashiness; he was tall and lean with a hard-shaved blue jaw and large clear eyes that would make flint seem soft. Nobody seemed to know what business he was in.

Heads Morgan crossed from the bamboo thicket that half hid the casino. He had a zipper-closed briefcase under one arm; his coat was open and his twenty-dollar gold piece luck charm swung loosely from the chain across his vest.

"The Drake, and hurry," he said, getting in. He didn't look at Carlson; nobody notices a cab driver.

Carlson forgot to get out and open the door when he reached the Drake. That small oversight had its place in the simple and casual chain of events. Heads Morgan opened the door and got out, gave the door an easy shove that merely clicked the primary latch. Then he unclasped his gold luck piece from the watch chain, and said, "Double or nothing for the ride."

"Sure," said Carlson. "Tails."

The coin arched, hit with a small sharp slap in Heads Morgan's palm. Morgan extended his hand over the front door of the cab so Carlson could see.

"I win; heads."

And then things happened. Two men were suddenly there alongside Morgan, and one of them said throatily, "No; you lose, Heads."

Carlson couldn't see much except that they were both tall and that one was heavy and the other thin. They had hats pulled low and polo coat collars turned high.

The heavier one said, "We know all about them slick-faced aces, Heads," and he grabbed for the briefcase Morgan had under his left arm.

Heads Morgan snatched for the gun under his coat. He was fast. He got the gun into view, but he never thumbed off the safety. He stiffened, with his mouth coming open above the blue jaw and the air sucking in sharp and fast, as one of the men made a jabbing motion at his ribs.

Carlson didn't sit around watching any longer. He gunned the motor and let out the clutch. The taxi jumped like a man getting the hot-foot. The two men in polo coats were crowding Heads Morgan, and all three of them rolled in a tangle along the side of the taxi as it lurched away. They went down in a heap off the curb.

Heads Morgan never got up under his own power.

CHICK Carlson still didn't hear the chuckle of Fate, when he found Heads Morgan's zipper briefcase a quarter of an hour later. He already had the gold piece.

When Heads Morgan went for his gun, he'd dropped his luck piece. It fell to the rubber floor mat and rolled against the base of the gear shift. Carlson drove around town awhile, switching about in case somebody should be following. He got the gold piece and put it in his pocket. Then he drove to the Wagon Wheel, parked, got out and found the briefcase dangling from the side of the cab—dangling empty, the zipper pulled open by the jolting weight of the leather case.

A car door has two latches. Heads Morgan had shut the door softly, clicking only the primary latch. When he and his killers rolled along the side of the lurching cab, they'd crammed that door tight shut—crammed it shut on the little leather tab of the zipper slide.

Heads Morgan obviously was killed for the contents of that zipper briefcase. And those contents were now sifted into the wind and under the wheels of San Francisco. . . .

Carlson went home, with the gold piece luck charm as a souvenir of a thrill. He read about Heads Morgan's death in the paper next morning. The killers had jumped into a car and escaped. Police were working. . . .

Chick Carlson laughed to himself, and had another piece of toast. If he wanted. *If* he wanted, he could find the killers of Heads Morgan. Sure as the sun comes up.

But he was through with this. There'd be another prank next week. And Chick Carlson liked his neck. He didn't want to stick it out on account of a guy like Heads Morgan. Let the cops do their own chores.

So Chick Carlson practiced polo that afternoon, went to a party that night. The next morning he read the paper with his toast and coffee in his hotel apartment. He sipped coffee and munched toast while hundreds fell in China and Spain, while a sensational murder trial was hashed, while a tornado took its toll.

Then a little bit of an item at the bottom of page one hit him between the eye and he spilled coffee over his pajamas.

The item said:

The bullet-ridden body of James Smith, 38, taxi driver, was found in Golden Gate Park by police early this morning.

Smith had asked for police protection after turning State's evidence in a narcotic case a month ago. He had feared underworld vengeance, and police are following that theory.

James Smith. A common enough name to remember.

Chick Carlson sat there and tried not to think. He didn't want to think. He wasn't used to facing things.

He sat there gawping at the paper. Of course the two men who had knifed Heads Morgan had traced the taxi by the number. Maybe they had laughed before killing Smith when he couldn't produce what had been in that zipper case—laughed because he told them, "But I loaned my taxi to a playboy that night! He paid me twenty-five bucks to borrow it!" That would be funny.

Carlson saw what it made *him*. It was like borrowing a bottle of ink and bringing it back full of nitroglycerine. He'd borrowed a cab and brought it back loaded with murder. He tried to shove the thought away. He didn't like to face things. Struggles with the soul were for books and movies and radio dramas. What the hell? Smith might have been bumped by somebody else, anyhow, according to the paper. Smith was a squealer, afraid of the pals he'd betrayed when he copped a plea.

But, still. . . Carlson kept seeing the battered, flat, good-natured face of the taxi hawk.

CARLSON tried to drop back into the swing. He spent a weekend on Tommy Sundell's yacht and tried to get excited about practice for the coming polo match with Hollywood. But everything seemed stale and futile, as if it had been done over and over and always would be, and what did it matter. It was all right during the daytime. A man could go at something hard and maybe lift a few slugs of liquor. But the more slugs you lifted, the quicker you woke up at night. It was ridiculous. Chick Carlson laughed it off—during the daytime. But it was different at night. He kept thinking of that flat-faced taxi driver. "He'd be alive if I hadn't borrowed his cab. . . . What the hell? A two-bit squealer. . . . But what made him what he was? Where would *I* be if I was born poor and saw money all around—rich playboys who'd never worked a day in their lives. Where'd I be if I was

born poor and quit school early, and grew up to realize I'd never get anywhere—or get anything unless I took it. . . . He was a life; his life was all he had. The world ended for him when he died. He lived all his life worrying about tomorrow's bread, and he died because I wanted a thrill. . . ."

It wasn't easy at night.

Carlson tried the easy way out. He took to going to the Tongan Village and listening around in the casino. He dropped a question here and there.

That got no place.

He decided he needed a trip. That was it. A trip. A change. New faces, new scenes. In a rut here. He called the downstairs clerk from his hotel apartment.

"Get me a seat on tonight's plane East."

Then he started to pack. With his luggage strewn around, he stood flipping Heads Morgan's luck piece. It was a twenty-dollar gold coin set in a gold rim with a round clasp at the top. Carlson kept flipping and catching it.

Finally he muttered aloud: "What the hell? I've been always wanting a thrill. I'll tell this one to my grandkids. If I live to have any."

He called the desk: "Make that a seat on tomorrow morning's plane." He hung up, smiling tightly. He could get the men who got Smith. Because they were the ones who had got Heads Morgan. He could get them because of Heads Morgan's good luck charm. He just had to flash that charm.

Facing the thing suddenly had him feeling calm and serene. He could be detached even as he speculated whether, before the night was over, he would have avenged Smith, or joined him.

HE COULD feel the bulge of the automatic under his left arm when he walked into the casino of the Tongan Village that night. With each step the heavy gold luck charm swung out and back against his vest. He had a gold watch chain strung between two vest pockets and the luck piece was clasped over the chain to swing loosely of its own weight.

The roulette wheel was in the center of the room, dice at the right, bird cage beyond, blackjack in the corner. On the other side of the room were the card tables. The long bar was at the front. The place was comfortably filled, as usual. White shirt fronts and white shoulders. Glitter of gems. Rattle of the roulette ball, soft whir of shuffled cards,

staccato murmur of voices, click of chips, chatter of dice. Carlson nodded at the habitués he knew, and could see their eyes catch on the luck piece and then come up to his face and shift away. A twenty-dollar gold piece is distinctive on a man's middle.

An arm on his shoulder, smiling Eddie Quill asking, "How's she going, Chick?" Eddie Quill ran the place.

"So-so, Eddie. How's business?"

"That's quite an ornament you got there, Chick. Come on in the office for a little drink."

They went in the office and Eddie Quill poured two drinks, and asked: "What's eating you about Heads Morgan, Chick? A while ago you was working the pump around about him, and now you're wearing his bauble."

"I understand he was here the night he was bumped."

Eddie Quill could never forget his smile. "Look, Chick, you're a nice kid with plenty of dough and I like your sort of patronage. But you want to stay where you're at and let others stay where they're at. So I'd take that thing off my watch chain and clam it, Chick."

Carlson said, "A man's got a right to wonder if he wants to."

Eddie Quill's eyes were calculating above the smile. "Sure, Chick; it's a free country. I do some wondering myself. I used to wonder how a crooked rat like Heads Morgan got away with it so long. He was here that night, him and a couple other guys, and these guys had a briefcase. So Heads calls for a deck of cards and I take them to him myself personally. So him and one of the other guys cuts cards, and they both get aces. So Heads cuts an ace the next time and the other guy gets a trey. So Heads takes the briefcase and goes out. So pretty soon the other guys jumps up and lams out quick. Me, I've been keeping the old onion peeled, so I ease over and start fooling with that deck of cards they've been cutting. So I find I can cut an ace ten times out of ten. I'm not saying that Heads Morgan switched decks for a pack with the aces waxed. I was watching his hands all the time, because I know Heads. I'm not saying he switched for a slick-faced aces deck when he cut for the briefcase. I'm not saying that these other two guys found it out like I did, and went and finished off Heads. I'm not saying. Me, I'm just wondering, like maybe you are, Chick."

"And who were the other two men?" Carlson

asked.

"Never saw them before," grinned Eddie Quill. "Me, I never noticed 'em. Wouldn't know 'em if they walked in here right now and spit in my face. And I ain't curious, Chick. Me, I wouldn't want to know who them two guys was. See you around, Chick, boy."

"See you around, Eddie."

Carlson went out and played red and black alternately on the wheel for a hundred dollars. He continued wearing the luck piece. Eddie Quill watched from the bar with a chiseled smile.

CARLSON kept expecting a word in his ear. He knew that at least half the men who frequented a high-stake casino like the Tongan Village would be men whose money came the easy way. And such men have a way of spreading news quickly and quietly. He figured the word would get around about that luck charm, and then there would be a word in his ear. He could feel the outline of the holster under his left arm. The killers of Heads Morgan would come for that briefcase. They wouldn't know about the contents sifting onto the night streets. They would come.

But when the lights began flashing on and off for the closing signal, they hadn't come; no word had been whispered. Chick Carlson got hat and topcoat out of check and went into the foggy outside air feeling a little weak from the tension. Weak—and relieved. He'd tried. He'd done what he thought would draw the killers. He'd done all he could, and no man could do more.

He knew his nights would be peaceful from now on. He'd done all he could; and that was enough.

He slid under the wheel of his roadster onto the leather seat damp with fog. The floodlights among the date palms were off by this time. Cars of a few stragglers like himself were whining starters, blinking fuzzy headlights into the gloom. And then two men stood up into view alongside the car. In the fog Chick Carlson couldn't see much except that they both were tall, one heavy and one thin. They had hats pulled low over their eyes and polo coat collars turned high along their faces.

The heavier one said, "We'll thumb a ride."

Carlson knew his nights would be peaceful from now on, if he had any more nights.

"Don't take your hands off the wheel," the heavy man said. He got in close to Carlson and frisked him, took the automatic from the shoulder

holster. Then the lean man got in. "Get going," said the heavy man.

Carlson took a skidding turn out the palm-lined drive and onto the asphalt highway.

"Just a playboy, huh?" the heavy man said. His breath was bad. "We beat the hell out of that taxi driver and he still claimed it was a playboy borrowed his cab that night. . . . Turn to the right here. . . . And you're just playboy enough to wear Heads Morgan's watch fob for a thrill. Damned lucky for that taxi driver that a waiter I knew in the Wagon Wheel saw him there all that night. Damned lucky for him."

"Why did you kill him, if the waiter said he'd been in the tavern all night?"

"We didn't kill him, playboy. And so you want a thrill. Are you getting a thrill, playboy?"

Of course, they wouldn't confess to murdering the taxi driver.

A fist swung around and smashed Carlson in the face.

"I asked a question, playboy. You get in the habit of answering."

Carlson's face felt like the lips were gone. "Yes, I'm having a thrill," he said to the question. He went south on El Camino Real, turned right at Burlingame, wound among the hills, taking this fork and that at the heavy man's direction. In the fog nothing could be seen but the little space of asphalt unwinding in front of the headlights.

"Pull up this driveway. . . . Now around back of the house."

The heavy man unlocked the rear door of the pink stucco house, went in flashing a light along a hallway. Carlson followed into the front room, with the lean man close behind him. A table lamp went on in the center of the room. There was a big window at the front covered with a Venetian blind. A door was at the south and another, the one he had come through, at the west. The room was furnished like any lower middle-class place. Drop ceilings, jazz-plaster walls, fireplace and floor furnace; oak floor; Monterey-type furniture in antique white; framed print of the Lone Wolf above the fireplace. .

"A simple place," the heavy man said, "and private. Not a neighbor for half a mile. And so you borrowed the taxi from Smith that night, playboy? Just for a prank, yes?"

"That's right." Carlson had learned his lesson about answering questions.

THE two men took off hats and polo coats. Carlson kept his topcoat on. The thin man had a hawk nose and sad eyes. The heavy man was round and blonde of head with a thick red neck that showed white valleys when he moved his head. He asked, "Where's the stuff, playboy?"

"What stuff?" Carlson didn't know what else to say.

The heavy man brought a pocketknife into view. It had a white bone handle, a single thin blade about four inches long. He pressed the handle and the blade clicked open. He stepped close, pressing the knife against Carlson's topcoat over the abdomen. Carlson retreated backwards across the room and the big man followed with the knife giving a steady pressure. Carlson stopped with his shoulders against the wall. The knife was razor sharp. The point of it was through the topcoat, vest and linen, with the bare point prickling the skin. He sucked in his stomach and the knife followed.

"Thought I learned you to answer questions," the heavy man said. "Where is that stuff that was in Heads Morgan's bag? Speak up quick and say your piece."

The heavy man's breath was nauseating. The round blonde head was ramming close, and the point of the blade was cold against the skin. Chick Carlson knew fear and also something like exasperation. He might have let the police in on the play before he walked into the Tongan Village casino wearing the luck charm. But no, he'd had to have the old playboy angle. Just another screwball prank like stealing the horse from the milk wagon. Just the playboy angle. A prank—the last.

"Ease up on that knife or you'll never find out," Carlson said, sparring for thinking time.

"You can't put the heat on me, playboy," the heavy man jiggled the knife. "Out with it, playboy. I'm getting impatient."

There was no hope, and so Carlson tried for an offhand finish. He knew these men would murder to cover murder, regardless.

"I threw the stuff in the can and flushed it down the drain," he said. "And you can go to hell."

The heavy man moved quickly. Pressure of the knife released and then came ramming at Carlson's abdomen with all the brute power of the hulking shoulder. Half turning, Carlson's spine hit the jazz-plaster wall as he doubled over, his two hands clutching. The big man made just that terrific shove and then let go the knife and stood there while

Carlson hunched forward with his hands clawing at his middle. Carlson's knees bent slowly, and then he went over and lay gasping.

"Think it over, playboy," said the heavy man, standing there. "You'll live a couple, three days; they always do with a slit belly. But unless you talk, you'll pray to die quick." He turned to the thin man. "Let's have a drink."

"S-sure," said the thin man. "A couple of drinks."

Carlson lay there with his hands at his middle and the right side of his face against the cool smoothness of the oak floor. His eyes were wide and staring, and he watched them go into the hallway to the west, leaving the door open. They went into a room to the right of the hallway and left that door open.

Chick Carlson cautiously got to his feet, the bone handle of the knife in his right hand. He couldn't help unbuttoning his topcoat and looking at the twenty-dollar luck charm hanging on the chain that stretched between two vest pockets. Gold is soft and tempered steel is hard. The point of the knife had gone through the topcoat and stuck into the luck charm and the charm had slid along the chain against the vest as Carlson made that instinctive half turn. The heavy man had felt the knife moving, with perhaps just about the right resistance. Looking at the sharp depression in the luck piece, Carlson wondered briefly what would have happened that night in front of the Drake if Heads Morgan hadn't dropped his good-luck charm to go for his gun.

Carlson could have gone out the other door, but he didn't think of that. He was utterly confident; any man would be, after getting a chunk of luck that size. He walked silently into the hallway and through the door to the right. Without anger or fear. He pitied the two men who whirled to face him. He made just two fast motions with the knife. The heavy man did get a gun out but he never got a chance to use it. It was Carlson's gun and he put it in the shoulder holster and went out of there.

He thought he would be able to sleep from now on.

THE next morning Carlson finished packing for his trip. He knew Eddie Quill and some others

might do some guessing, but they'd say no more about this affair than they had about the Heads Morgan murder.

He had the desk clerk call a taxi. A bellhop came for the luggage. Outside, the bellhop put the bags in the taxi and Carlson got in.

Then he saw the driver's face twisted around, looking at him. The face looked like it had been used for a doormat. The nose was wide and flat and little white scar lines ran around the lips and through the eyebrows. The face was bruised, also, and one eye was swollen.

"I knowed I'd run into you sometime, playboy," the driver said.

Carlson felt the hair actually rise on his neck, and his collar began squeezing like an opening and closing hand.

"James Smith!"

The flat-faced driver got out very deliberately, opened the door and jerked Carlson outside by the wrist.

"J. A. Smith," he said. "Jefferson Albert Smith. Just call me Al. And two mugs beat the hell out of me after that night when you borrowed my hack. I knowed I'd find you sometime, playboy."

Carlson saw the fist coming. He didn't try to dodge. James Smith . . . police theory of gang vengeance . . . Too much coincidence . . .

He woke up flat on his back. People were around in the sunny morning. A cop was holding Jefferson Albert Smith, and the flat-faced one was declaring: "Okay, then I go to jail, but it was worth it."

Hands helped Chick Carlson up.

"Let that guy go!" Carlson told the cop. "Me, I just slipped and fell. . . . Hurry, Jefferson Albert Smith, or I'll miss that plane."

At the airport, Carlson slipped the driver a coin and made a dash for the plane. "Keep the change, and good luck to you!"

Jefferson Albert Smith looked at the coin in his hand. It was a twenty-dollar gold piece set in a gold ring, with a round clasp at the top.

Jefferson Albert Smith shook his battered, good-natured head slowly, grinning.

"Nutty as an acre of pecans," he said. "Just a playboy."