

# Beijing Craps

By Graham Masterton

**Like all professional gamblers, whose days are measured only in throws, and rolls, and hands, and spins, it had never seriously occurred to Jack Druce that he would ever have to face death. But that Friday morning at the Golden Lode Casino, at the exact instant when the second-hand swept silently past 1 a.m., he shivered, and lifted his head, and frowned, as if he had been momentarily touched by the chilly breath of impending extinction.**

Alert to the slightest tremor in mood at the craps table, the croupier noticed his hesitation, and said, 'Intending to shoot, sir-r-r?' His 'r's' rolled as hard as dice.

Solly Bartholomew noticed Jack's hesitation, too, but didn't lift his eyes from the layout.

Jack nodded, and scooped up the dice, but didn't speak.

He had already stacked up eleven thousand dollars' worth of chips in three hours' play. But for no reason at all he suddenly felt as if the layout had gone cold, the same way that (seven years ago) his wife Elaine had grown cold, lying in his arms, asleep first of all, breathing, then not breathing, then dead.

Jack guessed that he and Solly could make two or three thousand more. Solly was the only other professional at the table; a neat man who looked like a smalltown realtor, but who threw the dice with all the tight assurance of a practised arm. Cautiously, showing no outward signs that they knew each other, or that they were working together, he and Jack were carving up the amateurs between them.

There was money around, too. Not yacht money, for sure, but lunch money. They had just been joined by a tall horse-faced over-excited man from Indianapolis in a powder-blue polyester suit who was placing his chips on all the hardways bets, and a redhead with her roots showing and a deep withered cleavage who yelped like a chihuahua every time Jack threw a pass. Divorcee, Jack calculated, splashing out with her settlement. She wouldn't stop playing until every last cent of it was totally blown. It was a form of revenge. Jack knew all about women's revenge. Elaine had stopped breathing while he was holding her in his arms, and what revenge could any woman have exacted on any man that was more terrible than that?

Jack blew softly on the ivories, shook them twice, and sent them tumbling off across the soft green felt. 'Nine,' commented the croupier, and pushed Jack another stack of fifty-dollar chips.

'I'm out,' said Jack, and began gathering his winnings in both hands.

Solly hesitated for a moment; then said, 'Me too.'

'Aw shit,' said the tall horse-faced man.

The croupier's eyes flicked sideways toward the pit boss. Jack said, 'Something wrong, my friend?' He had spent thirty years of his life dealing with men who communicated whole libraries with the quiver of an eyelid.

'Pit boss'd like a word, sir. And-' turning toward Solly, '- you, too, sir. That's if you don't mind.'

'I have a plane to catch,' Solly complained. Solly always had a plane to catch.

'It's ten after one in the morning,' the croupier told him.

'Well I have to catch some sleep before I catch my plane.'

'This won't take long, sir, believe me.'

Jack and Solly waited with their hands full of chips while the small neat pit boss approached him. White tuxedo, ruffled pink shirt, smooth Sieneese face, eyes like slanted black olives, black hair parted dead-center. The pit boss held out one of his tiny hands, as if to guide them away from the table by the elbow, but he didn't actually touch them. Players were not to be physically touched. It was bad karma.

'Mr Newman presents his compliments, sir.'

'Oh does he?' asked Jack, sniffing and blinking behind his heavy-rimmed eyeglasses. Beside him, he heard the redhead yelping again.

The pit boss smiled, and went along with the pretense. 'Well, sir, Mr Newman is the joint owner of the Golden Lode, sir. And he would like to see you.'

Jack held up his chips. 'Listen, my friend, I have my winnings here.'

Solly said, 'Me too.'

'Of course,' said the pit-boss. His smile slid out of the side of his mouth like the cottonseed oil pouring out of a freshly-opened can of sardines. 'We'll take care of your winnings, sir. Carlos! Here, take care of these gentlemen's winnings.'

'Twelve and a half k,' said Jack, pointedly, as if it were more money than he had ever possessed in his life.

'Five,' said Solly, without expression.

'Don't worry, sir. Carlos will keep it in the safe for you.'

With a great show of reluctance, Jack handed over his chips. 'Twelve and a half k,' he repeated. 'What do you think of that?'

Behind his well-pumiced acne craters, the stone-faced Carlos obviously thought nothing of it at all. One night's winnings for a mid-Western mark, that was all. The casino would have it all back tomorrow, or the next night.

'Please ... this young lady will show you to Mr Graf,' said the pit-boss, still smiling. From somewhere behind him, like an assistant in one of those corny Las Vegas lounge magical acts, a Chinese-looking girl appeared, in a skin-tight dress of cerise silk, with a split all the way up to the top of her thigh.

'Please follow,' she said, and immediately turned and began to walk ahead of them. Jack glanced at Solly and Solly glanced back at Jack. They could cut and run. But Jack had heard

of Mr Graf; and Mr Graf had a hard, hard reputation; and if they ran away from Mr Graf, then the chances were that they would have to keep on running, for the rest of their natural borns.

Whatever had to be faced, had to be faced. Jack and Solly had both been beaten up before, more than once.

The Chinese-looking girl was already halfway across the casino floor, headed toward the wide violet-carpeted staircase that led down from the restaurant and the offices.

Solly said, 'After you, sport,' and Jack shambled after her like an obedient mutt, tugging the knot of his necktie, although it was already too tight. During his gambling career, he had deliberately cultivated the dislocated mannerisms of a Rube, freshly off the Piedmont redeye from the rural mid-West with a billfold crammed with ready money and no idea of how to play the tables.

In reality he had been born in Providence, Rhode Island, the son of a high school principal, and he was both well-educated and extensively-traveled. He had lived in Florence, in Aqaba, and Paris; and in the 1950s he had spent nine miserable months in London. But in the late 1960s he had spent six weeks living in Bellflower, Illinois, painstakingly imitating the local mannerisms and the local speech. These days, only a fully-bloomed Bellfiorian could have detected that his accent wasn't for real. He still said 'grass' instead of 'grayce.'

He had altered his appearance, too. He had cropped his hair short and bought himself a vivid chestnut-brown toupee. He had adopted thick-rimmed eyeglasses and sunbathed in his T-shirt, so that he had acquired that farm-style tan, face and neck and forearms only. Every morning he squeezed lumps of modeling clay in the palms of his hands, to give himself cheesy-looking crescents of dirt under his fingernails.

When he was working, he assumed a crumpled seersucker suit in brown-and-white check, a brown drip-dry shirt, and scuffed tan sneakers. At least, he liked to think that he 'assumed' them, and that his 'real' clothes were the clothes that hung in the closet of his suite at the Sands hotel. A single gray Armani suit, three handmade shirts, and a pair of polished English shoes.

In reality, however, the 'real' clothes had scarcely been worn, because Jack was always working. Even the soles of his 'real' shoes remained unscratched. He spent all afternoon and most of the night as Jack Druce the Rube. The rest of the time he spent sprawled on his back on his hotel bed with his sheet knotted around his waist like a loincloth, dreaming of Elaine going cold in his arms and whispering numbers to himself. But he needed the 'real' clothes to be hanging there waiting for him.

If he ever discarded his 'real' clothes, then the 'real' Jack Druce would cease to exist; and all that would be left would be Jack Druce the Rube; Jack Druce the Chronic Gambler. The laughing, sophisticated young college graduate would have vanished for ever; so would the husband of Elaine; and the father of Roddy, for what that was worth.

On the last day of May, 1961, Jack Druce had been a mathematical whiz-kid, the youngest research team-leader that San Fernando Electronics had ever employed. On the last day of May, 1961, San Fernando Electronics had brought two hundred seventy employees to Las Vegas, for the company's tenth annual convention. That night, Jack Druce had played dice for the very first time in his life, and doubled his annual salary in four-and-a-half hours.

Jack Druce had woken on the first day of June, 1961, with the certain knowledge that he had been hooked.

Now his house was gone and his car was gone. Not because he couldn't afford them. Most days, technically, he was very rich. The simple fact was that houses and cars didn't figure in his life any more. He lived in hotels; he walked to work; and he subsisted on free casino snacks and Salem Menthol Lights. His home was the Pass line. He never looked at his watch.

The Chinese girl led Jack and Solly through thick suffocating velour curtains, and then through double doors of heavy carved Joshua wood.

'I'm not so sure about this,' Jack told her; but she turned and half-smiled and said, 'Don't be afraid.'

Solly said nothing. Solly had an especially sensitive nose for danger. Solly was sniffing the atmosphere, checking it out.

Beyond the double doors, they found themselves in a large gloomy room, ferociously chilly with air-conditioning. In the center of the room stood a gaming-table, lit by a single low-hanging lamp of bottle green glass, a dark secretive lamp that scarcely illuminated the table at all, and gave to the six or seven men and women who were hunched around it a ghastly green look, as if they had been dead for several days.

Jack frowned at them. Two of them looked as if they had one foot in the grave for real. Their white hair shone silvery-green in the reflected light from the lamp; their skin was shrink-wrapped over their skulls, and thick with wriggling veins.

Yet three of the players were almost children - a spotty boy of sixteen or seventeen; a young girl of not much more than twelve; and a blond-headed boy who was so small he could scarcely throw the dice.

All of them, however, shared something in common. They all wore loose Chinese robes, of gleaming black silk, with fire-breathing dragons embroidered on the back, and the name Nu Kua in red silk italics.

'Come,' said the Chinese girl, and led Jack and Solly toward the table.

Jack was fascinated to see that the dice appeared to glow fluorescently in the darkness; and that when they were thrown, they left glowing patterns in the air. Solly watched the game over his shoulder for a while, and then murmured, 'What the hell kind of craps is that?'

Jack looked around the table. 'I'm supposed to be talking to Mr Graf,' he said, loudly.

The blond-headed boy left his place and came around the table, smiling and holding out his hand in greeting. He looked no older than five or six.

Jack smiled. 'How's tricks, kid?'

'I'm Nevvar Graf,' the boy told him, in an unbroken but carefully-modulated voice.

'Sure and I'm Tammy Wynette.'

The boy continued to hold out his hand. 'You don't believe me?' he asked, tilting his head to one side.

'Nevvar Graf has owned the Golden Lode Casino for twenty years, minimum. He's just about old enough to be your grandfather.'

The boy smiled. 'There are more things on heaven and earth, Horatio.'

'Oh, sure,' Jack nodded. 'Now is Mr Graf here, because if not, I intend to leave.'

'I told you, Mr Druce, I'm Nevvar Graf.'

There was something in the tone of the boy's voice that caught Jack's attention. Something far too commanding for a boy of five. And how did he know Jack's name? Jack took off his spectacles and folded them and tucked them slowly into his pocket.

The boy said, 'I'm Nevvar Graf, and you're Jack Druce. I've been watching you for years, Mr Druce. You're good, one of the best arms in the business. Everybody knows Jack Druce. It's always beaten me why you dress so crummy, and talk so dumb, when everybody knows who you are. You saw Carlos downstairs? The minute you leave the Golden Lode, Carlos always gets on to the radio-transmitter and warns the doorman at the Diamond Saloon.'

Jack said, hoarsely, 'Young fellow, I don't know what the hell you think you're playing at, but my name is Keith Kovacs, and I came here from Illinois for the week to gamble a few hundred dollars, just like I've always promised myself; and when my money's all gone, I'll be gone, too.'

'Jack Druce?' he added. 'I never even heard of anybody called Jack Druce.'

The boy popped his knuckles, one by one. 'You see that game going on behind me?'

'I see it,' said Jack. 'Some kind of fancy dice.'

'Beijing Craps,' the boy told him, with a smile.

Jack shook his head. 'Never heard of it.'

'Never heard of it, huh?' The boy turned to Solly, and said, 'Have you heard of it? Beijing Craps?'

Solly nervously sniffed, and lowered his eyes. 'Sure. I've heard of it.'

The boy circled around Jack and took hold of Solly's hand. 'Solly Bartholomew,' he said, in that piping voice. 'The greatest arm in the east. The scourge of the Atlantic City boardwalk.'

Solly didn't attempt to deny it. He stood holding the boy's hand with his eyes on the carpet and said nothing.

'Beijing Craps,' the boy repeated. 'The legendary magical mystical Beijing Craps. Banned in China since the revolution; banned in Thailand where they don't ban nothing; punishable by flogging in Japan; punishable by death in Viet Nam. Illegal in every country in the world, with the exception of Pol Pot's Cambodia, and that's where these dice were smuggled in from.'

He tugged Solly's hand. 'Come on, Solly, come closer. Take a look.'

Solly stayed where he was, his head still lowered. The boy tugged his hand again, then smiled. 'You don't want to take a look? You don't have to play.'

'You know just what the fuck you're talking about,' said Solly, his false teeth clenched together. 'If I look, I'll have to play.'

The boy laughed. 'That's up to you, Solly. You're ready for it. You know that you're ready for it. That's why I asked you up here, you and your friend Jack Druce. I've been watching you two lately and you're the cream de la cream. But you're getting bored, too. You're too damned good for your own damned good. What's the fun, when you don't play the game to the limit - can't play the game to the limit, because the pit boss is going to suss you out and then you're finished at the Golden Lode; and then you're finished at Caesar's Palace and Glitter Gulch and even Sassy Sally's, and before you know it you're finished in Vegas altogether, then Reno, then Tahoe, then Atlantic City.'

'That's when clever men like you start to play Russian Roulette, and hoping you'll lose. But Nevvar Graf here has an alternative for you, a different way out, a new life maybe, leave the old life behind, all or nothing. Beijing Craps.'

Jack said, dryly, 'You're Nevvar Graf, aren't you? You really are.'

The boy released Solly's hand and came back to Jack, and looked up at him, his eyes bright with mischief. 'I really am. And what you're looking at is proof. Look at me, I'm five years old! And that's the magic of Beijing Craps. You win, you can live your life all over again!'

Solly nodded toward the table, where the white-haired men and women were rasping their breath on to the dice. 'What if you lose?'

'You won't lose. You're too good. You know you're too good.'

Jack stepped up to the table, and inspected the layout. 'So what's in it for you?' he wanted to know. 'Why'd you want me to play?'

The boy smiled more gently now. 'Same as always, Jack. The odds favor the house; and I'm the house.'

'Explain it to me,' said Jack.

The boy came up and stood beside him. 'It's pretty much the same as a regular dice game. You pick up the dice, you make your bet, you shoot; and other players fade your bet. The only difference is that we use special dice, you want to take a look?'

Jack looked across the table at the withered yellow-faced old man who was holding the dice. He had never seen such an expression of dumb panic in anybody's eyes in his whole life; not even on the faces of trust-fund managers who had just gambled away their clients' investments, or husbands who had just lost their houses.

'Mr Fortunato, will you pass me the dice for just a moment?' asked the boy.

Old Mr Fortunato hesitated for one moment, the dice held protectively in the cage-like like claw of his hand.

'Come on, Mr Fortunato,' the boy coaxed him; and at last he dropped them into the boy's open palm. The boy passed them carefully to Jack.

They were greenish-black, these dice, and they tingled and glowed. Holding them in his hand, Jack felt as if the ground were sliding away beneath his feet, like jet-lag, or a minor earth tremor. Instead of numbers, they were engraved with tiny demonic figures - figures whose outlines crawled with static electricity.

'There are six Ghosts on each dice,' the boy explained. 'If you shoot Yo Huang - this one - and Kuan-yin Pusa - this one - that's roughly the same as throwing a seven in craps; and if you shoot Yo Huang and Chung Kuei - here - that's just about the same as throwing eleven. In either case, these are the Beijing equivalent of naturals, okay, and you win.

'Yo Huang was the Lord of the Skies; Kuan-yin Pusa was a good and great sorceress. Chung Kuei was known as the Protector Against Evil Spirits.'

Jack slowly rubbed the dice between finger and thumb. 'That's three Ghosts. What are the other three?'

'Well,' smiled the boy. 'They're the bad guys. This one with the hood is Shui-Mu, the Chinese water demon; and this little dwarf guy is Hsu Hao, who changes joy to misery; and this is Yama the judge of hell, who was the first mortal ever to die - and do you know why?'

'I have a feeling you're going to tell me,' said Jack.

The boy smiled. 'He was the first mortal ever to die because he traveled down the road from whence there is no return.'

Solly licked his lips. 'The road from whence there is no return? What's that?'

The boy turned and looked at him slyly. 'You're traveling down it already, my friend. You should know.'

'Let me feel those dice,' Solly demanded.

Jack closed his fingers over them. 'Solly ... maybe you shouldn't.'

'Oh, yeah? And any particular reason why not? Seeing as how I'm already supposed to be taking the hike with no return?'

There was such a crackling charge of power from the dice that Jack felt as if every nerve in the palm of his hand was wriggling and twitching, centipedes under the skin. He had the irrational but terrible feeling that the dice wanted Solly very badly. The dice knew that Solly was there; and they were hungry for him.

Solly held out his hand, and Jack reluctantly dropped the dice one after the other into his palm. Solly said nothing, but something passed across his eyes like a shadow across a doorway. There was no telling what Solly could feel. Jack suspected that the dice felt different for everybody who held them. It depended on your needs. It depended on your weaknesses.

'So you place your bet,' said Jack, without taking his eyes away from Solly. 'What do you bet? Your soul, something like that?'

'Oh, no, nothing as melodramatic as that. Anyway, what's a soul worth? Nothing. A soul is like a marker. Once the guy's dead, how's he going to pay?'

'So what's the stake?' Jack persisted.

'Months, that's what you bet,' the boy told him. From the other side of the table, Mr Fortunato hadn't lost sight of the dice for one moment, and when the boy said 'months', he shivered, as if the boy had said 'millions'.

'Months?' asked Solly.

The boy nodded, and then held out his hand for the dice. 'The shooter bets as many months as he wants, and the other players collectively put up an equal number of months that he's going to lose. Lunar months, that is, Chinese months. The rest of the players can bet amongst themselves, too, whether the shooter comes or don't come, except in Beijing Craps we say dies-a-little or lives-a-little; and there are hard-way bets, too, just like regular craps, whether the shooter throws two Yo Huangs or two Chung Kueis or whether he digs himself a grave and throws two Yamas.'

'But if you win, what?' asked Solly, hoarsely.

'If you win, you win months, that's what. Two, three months; maybe a year; maybe two years, depending what you've bet.'

Solly looked around, found himself a chair, dragged it over, and sat down. His breathing was harsh and irregular. 'You mean you actually get younger?'

The boy giggled. 'Look at me, Solly! Nevvar Graf, five years old!'

Solly rubbed his mouth with his hand, as if he were trying to smear away the taste of greasy hamburger. 'Jack,' he said. 'Jack, we got to give this a shot.'

Jack shook his head. 'Forget it,' he said; although his throat was dry. 'I play for money. Months, what's a month? Who wants to play for months?'

The boy shrugged. 'What do they say? Time is money. Money is time. It's all the same. You ought to try it, Jack, you'll like it. I mean, let's put it this way. Keeping yourself in toupees and hotel-rooms is one thing; but being ten years younger, that's something else. How about fifteen years younger, Jack? How about twenty years younger? How about walking away from this table tonight the same age you were when you first started gambling, with your whole life ahead of you, all over again? No more crap tables, no more cards, no more cigar-smoke, no more shills? How about a wife and a family, Jack, the way your life was always meant to be?'

'How the hell do you know how my life was always meant to be?' Jack retorted.

The boy's eyes gleamed. 'I've been working in this business all my life, Jack. You're just one of a million. The International Brotherhood of Optimistic Suckers.'

Jack looked at the table; at Solly; at the mean green lamp; at the strange assortment of faces around the layout. He knew with suffocating certainty that he would have to play before he left. Elaine had died in his arms; Roddy had dwindled to a Kodak photograph tucked in his wallet. The chance of starting over burned in the darkness of his present existence like the



molten line of the setting sun, burning on the western horizon. To go back! To catch up the sun!

He heard himself saying, 'Solly and me, we'll watch for a while.'

'Hey, you can watch,' Solly told him, abruptly standing up, and sniffing, and clearing his throat. 'Me, I'm going to play.'

'Solly -' Jack warned; but the boy touched one finger against his lips.

'We're all playing for time here, Jack. We're playing for life. It's your own decision; it's Solly's own decision.'

Jack looked at Solly - tried for the first time in a coon's age to look like a friend, somebody who cared; although he didn't find it easy. To the professional craps player, no expression comes easy.

The boy said, 'You'll have to change. There's a Chinese screen in the corner, with plenty of robes.'

'Change?' Solly wanted to know. 'Why?'

'You might win, Solly,' the boy smiled at him. 'You might win big. And if you win big, you might find yourself ten years old, all over again. And how would a ten-year-old boy look, hmh? in a 38-chest sport-coat like yours?'

Solly nodded. 'Sure. You're right. I'll change. For sure. If I lose, though - you won't take my suit for collateral?'

'You're a kidder, Solly,' the boy grinned at him. 'You're a genuine platinum-plated kidder.'

Solly disappeared behind the Chinese screen; and while everybody edgily waited for him, the boy whistled, *She's My Jeannie With The Light Brown Hair*, over and over.

At last Solly emerged in his black silk robe. He looked like an invalid, on his way to hydro-therapy. He smiled nervously - first at the rest of the players, then at Nevvar Graf, then at Jack.

Jack hesitated, and then stepped back. He didn't shake Solly's hand. He didn't say a word. He knew that - inside of himself - he was just as much of a victim as Solly.

'All right,' said the boy, smacking his hands. 'Let's play Beijing Craps!'

From out of the shadows at the back of the room, three Chinese and a Burmese appeared, dressed in the Golden Lode uniform of overtight black tuxedo and frilled shirtfront. The boy said, 'Same as regular craps, a boxman, a stickman, and two dealers. In Beijing Craps, though, we call them Tevodas, which means witnesses who can testify to somebody's sins.'

It was Mr Fortunato's turn to roll. Solly stood beside him, watching him with naked eagerness. 'Six months,' Mr Fortunato declared, and placed six shimmering gold tokens in front of him; tokens that shone brighter than the bottle-green lamp.

'Two weeks he dies-a-little,' whispered a white-haired old man from the far corner of the table.

'One month he lives-a-little,' said the twelve-year-old girl. Jack looked at her closely for the first time and realized that her hair had been permanent-waved in the style of a woman who was old enough to be her mother.

'One week he dies-a-little,' said one of the oldest players, a woman whose skull was showing through her skin. Her shriveled hand placed one of her last gold tokens on to the square marked with the face of Yama.

When all the bets had been placed, Mr Fortunato gasped on the dice, and rolled them. They sparkled and bounced, leaving fluorescent after-images of Chinese ghosts melting in the air over the tabletop. Yo-Hang and Kuan-yin Pusa. Mr Fortunato had won his six months.

'Mr Fortunato lives-a-little,' intoned the Tevoda, the stickman, and collected the dice and handed them back. Mr Fortunato breathed a little more easily on to the dice this time; but the old woman who had lost a week betting that he would die-a-little had begun to shudder. Jack swallowed and looked at the blond-haired boy; but the blond-haired boy simply grinned.

Mr Fortunato bet another six months, and rolled again. He threw Kuan-yin Pusa and Shui-Mu. The blond-haired boy leaned toward Jack and whispered, 'He's won again. In Chinese magic, Kuan-yin Pusa trapped Shui-Mu by feeding her with noodles which turned into chains in her stomach and locked her guts up for good. Throwing Kuan-yin Pusa and Shui-Mu is like a point in craps; and what Mr Fortunato has to do now is to throw them again. But if he throws Yo-Hang and Kuan-yin Pusa again, he loses.'

Jack watched every roll of the dice intently; and especially the side bets. Some of the players were picking up weeks here and there with easy bets; others lost one month after another with hard-ways bets. Live-a-little, die-a-little. Their lives ebbed and flowed with every roll.

Mr Fortunato bet a whole year, threw a crap, and lost it. Twelve months of his life, swallowed in an instant. Who knows what age Mr Fortunato had been, when he had started playing this game? Forty? Seventy? Twenty-two? It didn't matter. His age was determined by the dice now; his life depended on Beijing Craps. He coughed and wheezed with stress and badly-concealed terror, and passed the dice to Solly with fingers that could scarcely manage to open. Nobody else at the table showed any compassion. The blond boy had aged by three years since Mr Fortunato had started to play, and was far taller and more composed; although the woman with the skull-like face seemed to have shrunk in her black silk robe almost to nothing, more like a bewildered vivisected monkey than a human.

Jack caught Solly's eyes but he remained impassive. They were professionals, both of them. They helped each other on the tables when the dice were rolling, but they never ventured to give each other criticism, or personal advice, or to warn each other to back off, no matter how cold the table, no matter how vertiginous the bet. You want to fly, you want to die? That's your business. Under the lights, out on the center, there was nobody else but you, and Madame Luck.

'Solly,' said Jack; but the adolescent Mr Graf shot him a glance as hard as a carpet-tack, and he said nothing else.

Solly bet six months. He jiggled the dice in the palms of his hands, and breathed on them, and whispered something, and then he rolled. They had once called Solly the Arm of Atlantic

City; and his arm didn't fail him now. The dice bounced, glowed, and tumbled, and came up Kuan-yin Pusa and Yo Huang.

Next, he bet a year, and threw another natural. He threw again, and won again. Roll after roll, he played like a genius; played like Jack had never seen him play before. With each win, he gradually began to look younger. His gray hairs wriggled out of sight, his wrinkles unfolded like a played-back film of crumpled wrapping-paper. He stood taller, straighter, and played with even more confidence; and all the other players bet along with him, hardways bets, right bets, they shed years and years in front of Jack's eyes. After twenty minutes, he was watching a game played by young, good-looking, vigorous people: attractive young women and smiling young men. Their shriveled skin was plumper and pinker; their hair was thick and shiny; their voices roared with vigor and health.

'How about some champagne?' called Mr Fortunato. A twelve-year-old Mr Graf snapped his fingers stickily to one of the girls. 'Bring these people champagne.'

Jack didn't bet. Not yet. He was tempted to. But he wanted to bide his time. He wanted to see the losing side of this game, as well as the winning side. He wanted to work out the odds. And although Solly was winning, and consistently winning, it occurred to Jack that the younger he became, the less experienced he became, the more risks he was prepared to take, the wilder his arm.

'Ten years!' grinned a 24-year-old Solly, shaking the dice in his hands. 'I'm betting ten years! Fourteen again, and screw the zits!'

He rolled. The dice glowered, shimmered, sparkled. They bounced off the cushion on the opposite side of the layout, but then they seemed almost to slow down, as if they were bouncing through transparent glue. The Ghosts glowed malevolently for all to see. Yama and Shui-Mu. Craps. An entire decade was silently sucked from Solly's body and soul; and he visibly shuddered.

After that - as far as Solly was concerned - the table turned as cold as a graveyard. Mr Graf was shooting, winning a little here and a little there; but Solly was stacking his counters on all the impossible bets, trying to win time, trying to win time, but losing it with every roll. When Mr Graf finally missed, Solly was white-haired; on the verge of respiratory collapse. He sat hunched over the opposite side of the table, his hands dry like desert thorns, his head bowed.

Jack approached him but didn't touch him. Bad karma to touch him; no matter what affection he felt.

'Solly,' he said thickly, 'pull out now. You've lost, Solly. Call it quits.'

Solly raised his head and stared at Jack with filmy eyes. His neck hung in a brown-measled wattle.

'One more bet,' he whispered.

'Solly, for God's sake, you're falling apart. You look about a hundred years old.'

Solly wasn't amused. 'I'm eighty-seven, two months, and three days exactly, you unctuous bastard, thanks very much. And if I win another thirty on the next roll, I'll be only fifty-seven.'

And if I bet another thirty after that ... well, then, I'll be happy to quit. Life was good to me when I was twenty-seven. Twenty-seven is a pretty good age.'

Jack said nothing. If Solly bet thirty years and won, then Jack would be happy for him. But if he bet thirty years and lost...

He looked at Mr Graf. Mr Graf had lost six or seven years betting on Solly's last roll, and was looking much older again, and more like the Mr Graf that Jack had seen hurrying in and out of the Golden Lode, hedged in by minders and shills and hard-faced accountants. Mr Graf's eyes turned like a lizard's toward Solly. What could he say? Solly had lost and those who had lost were always hooked. Those who had won were hooked, too. So what could he say?

'You're not playing, Mr Druce? It's your roll, if you're playing.'

'If it's all the same to you, I think I'll stay out of it,' said Jack, although perspiration was sliding from his armpits and his fingernails were clenched into the palms of his hands.

'Sure thing. It's all the same to me,' said Mr Graf, immediately offering the dice to Mr Fortunato. With the unashamed greed of the truly fearful, Mr Fortunato held out his hand.

'Wait, Jack!' wheezed Solly, and took hold of Jack's sleeve, and twisted it. He bent his head close, so that Jack could smell his unexpected age, chalk and cloves and geriatric staleness. 'Jack, you're the best arm there ever was. If anybody can win back those years for me, you can. Jack, I'm begging you, Jack. We never did nothing for each other, did we? Never expected nothing, never asked for nothing. You know that. But I'm asking you now, Jack, I'm down on my knees. If you let Fortunato shoot next, I'm dead meat, Jack. I'm gone. You know that.'

Jack sniffed, the way that a heroin addict sniffs. He feared this game of Beijing Craps more than any game he had ever come across. It had all the glamor of punto banco and all the fascinating horror of standing in front of a speeding express train. He knew that if he rolled those dice just once, he would be caught for good.

Mr Graf sensed his hesitation, however, and held the glowing dice suspended in the air, just two inches above Mr Fortunato's open hand. Jack could almost see the nerves that crawled with anticipation in Mr Fortunato's palm.

Solly tugged his sleeve even tighter. 'Jack, for old time's sake, I'm pleading with you now. I never pled before. I never pled to nobody. But please.'

Jack hesitated for one more second. He didn't need to look at his watch. He never did. He knew what time it was. He loosened his necktie and said, 'Give me a minute to change, all right?'

He undressed behind the screen. The black dragon-robe was cold and silky on his skin. He tightened the sash, and then he reemerged, and Mr Graf was still waiting, still smiling.

Jack approached Nevvar Graf and slowly held out his hand. Mr Graf smiled secretively, and dropped the dice into Jack's palm. They tumbled and turned as slowly as if they didn't particularly care for gravity. When they touched Jack's palm, they felt like fire and ice and naked voltage.

The players gathered around the table again. The lamp was so dim that all Jack could see of their faces was smudges of paleness in the shadows. He shook the dice and tiny grave-worms of bluish fluorescence wriggled out from between his fingers. He bet six months, and stood back waiting while the side-bets were placed.

He threw the dice across the table. They jumped and sparkled with even more brilliance than they had before.

'You see that?' said Mr Graf, slyly. 'Even the *dice* know when an expert is throwing.'

Jack had come out with Chung Kuei and Yo Huang. Solly clenched his fists and breathed. 'All *right!* You goddamned brilliant son-of-a-bitch!'

Jack threw again, Kuan-yin Pusa and Chung Kuei. He threw them again the next throw, and picked up a whole year. He didn't *feel* any different, but it was stimulating to think that he was a whole year younger.

He continued to win, again and again and again; living-a-little and living-a-little more, throwing naturals and points as swiftly and confidently as if the dice were loaded - which, in a strange way, they were. The years fell away from him with every win, until he was betting two and three years at a time, and his black silk robe began to hang loosely around his slim twenty-two-year-old frame.

Solly placed numbers to win with almost every throw, and gradually won back the years he had lost before. He played cautiously, however, and didn't risk more than a year a time, until he reached forty-five.

Then - just as Jack was about to throw again he placed a hard-ways bet of twenty years.

Jack looked at him sharply, but Solly grinned and winked. 'One last throw, my friend, and then I'm going to walk away, and never come back.'

But Jack felt something in the dice; as if they had shrunk and tightened in the palm of his hand; as if they had suddenly gone cold. The dice were not going to let Solly go.

Jack said, 'Twenty years on one throw, Solly? That's a hell of a bet.'

'That's the last bet ever,' said Solly. 'You just do your bit, and let me take care of myself.'

Jack threw the dice. They dropped leadenly onto the layout, scarcely bouncing at all. They came up Shui-Mu and Hsua Hao, a win for Jack; but Solly had bet Shui-Mu and Shui-Mu, and he was immediately aged by twenty years.

Jack was only a little over twenty years old now. He stood straighter and taller, and his hair was thick and wavy and brown. He took off his toupee and crammed it into the pocket of his robe. Mr Graf smiled at him. 'Hair today, gone tomorrow, huh, Mr Druce?'

Jack scooped up the dice and prepared to throw them again. As he did so, Solly put down the gleaming tokens that showed he was staking another twenty years.

'Solly!' called Jack.

Solly looked up. 'Don't do it, Solly,' Jack warned him, in a clear and youthful voice; although he found that he didn't really care too much whether Solly lost another twenty years or not. Look at the guy, he was practically dead already.

'Just throw, will you?' Solly growled at him.

Jack threw; and won; but Solly lost yet again, and so did two or three of the others at the table. Jack heard from Solly a sharp harsh intake of breath, and then Solly staggered, and gripped the edge of the table to stop himself from falling.

'Solly? You okay?'

Solly's eyes bulged and his face was blue from lack of oxygen. 'What do you care?' he gasped. 'Will you shoot, for God's sake? Just shoot!'

Mr Graf was very young again, a small boy peering over the dimly-lit center of the table. He said to Solly with utmost calmness, 'Do you want an ambulance, sir? Or maybe I should call the house physician?'

'Shoot, that's all,' Solly insisted, and placed another twenty years on the table.

Jack slowly juggled the dice. Fire and honey in his hand. 'Solly ... you understand what could happen if you lose?'

'Shoot,' hissed Solly, through false teeth that were too large for his shrunken gums.

'Go on,' urged Mr Fortunato; although he too was ancient, with sunken ink-stained eyes and wispy white hair.

Jack shrugged, shook the dice, and threw.

Suddenly, the dice crackled with new vitality. They bounced on the opposite cushion, and tumbled across the table in a cascade of glowing Chinese images. They came to rest right in front of Solly.

Yama and Hsua Hao. Solly had lost.

'I -' he gargled. But traceries of light had already crept out of the dice, trembling and flickering like static electricity. They forked across the baize to the tips of Solly's fingers. Silently, enticingly - right in front of Jack's eyes - the light crept up Solly's arms, and entwined themselves around him in a brilliant cage.

'*Solly!*' Jack shouted.

But Solly began to shudder uncontrollably. His hair was lifted up on end, and white sparks began to shower out of his nose and eyes. He looked as if fierce fireworks had been ignited inside his head.

Jack heard a noise that was something like a sob and something like a scream, and then Solly collapsed onto his knees, although his fingers still clung to the edge of the table.

Twitching electricity streamed out of his body, shrinking down his arms and pouring out of his fingertips, back across the craps table and into the dice. They vanished into the Ghosts on

the dice like disappearing rats' tails. Solly dropped backward onto the floor, his skull hitting the polished wood with a hollow knock.

The dice remained on the table, softly glowing, as if Solly's life had given them renewed energy.

'Well, Mr Druce?' asked Nevvar Graf. 'We're waiting.'

Jack looked down at Solly's crumpled, dried-up body; and then at Nevvar Graf; and then back at the dice. The haunted circle of faces watched him expectantly.

Then - 'No,' said Jack. 'That's it. I'm out.'

'You still have five years on the table, Mr Druce. You'll lose your five years. Rules of the game.'

'I'm only twenty-two now. What do five years matter?'

Mr Graf smiled. 'Ask Mr Fortunato what five years matter. It's an education, Beijing Craps. It teaches you that the time you throw away when you're young, you'll bitterly regret when you're old. Beijing Craps teaches you the value of life, Mr Druce. What does a month matter, to a bored teenage kid? Nothing: he hopes that month will pass as soon as possible. But tell me what a month matters to a man with only one month left to live.'

Jack took a deep, steadying breath. 'Whatever, I'm out.'

'You'll be back.'

'Well, we'll just have to see about that.'

'All right,' shrugged Mr Graf. 'Carlos - will you escort Mr Druce out of the casino? And make sure you pay him his winnings. Thank you, Mr Druce. You have a rare skill with the ivories.'

Jack changed back into his loose seersucker suit. Before he left, he nodded to the circle of players. One or two of them nodded back; but most of them seemed to have forgotten him already. Carlos took his arm, the first time that anybody in the casino had touched him, and he was led back out into the bright glittering world of the Golden Lode.

When he had cashed his winnings, he went across to the *punto banco* table. He watched the game for a while, considering a couple of bets. A bleached-blond girl standing next to him was screaming with excitement as she won her first hand. But after Beijing Craps, the idea of playing for money seemed absurdly petty. He glanced back toward the staircase that led up to Mr Graf's private craps game. Carlos was still standing at the top of the stairs, and he smiled back at Jack with a smile like curdled milk.

Jack knew then that he would never escape. He would be back at that table, no matter how hard he tried to resist it. Maybe not tomorrow; maybe not next week; maybe not for years. But he would be back. No real gambler could resist the temptation of playing for his very life.

He left the Golden Lode and stepped out on to the hot, brilliantly bright sidewalk. He had started playing Beijing Craps at two o'clock in the morning, and now it was well past nine. For the first time in a long time he felt hungry; and he decided to go back to his hotel room

and shower and change, and then treat himself to a meal of prime rib and fried zucchini. He could wear his Armani suit, his *real* suit.

The sidewalk was crowded with shuffling tourists and squalling kids. Las Vegas wasn't what it used to be, back in the days of the mob. Bugsy Siegel would have rolled over in his desert grave to see creches and stroller parks and family restaurants, and hookers being turned away from casino doors. But Jack didn't care. He had found himself the ultimate game, even in this sanitized Las Vegas, and he was twenty-seven again. He had forgotten how much strength and energy he used to have, at twenty-seven - how light and easy it was to walk.

He went up to his hotel room humming along to the Muzak in the elevator. *Raindrops keep fallin' on my head ... they keep fallin' ...* He boogied along the corridor, chafing his feet on the nylon carpet, so that when he reached out for his doorhandle, there was a sharp crackling spark of static.

To his surprise, however, his door was half-an-inch ajar. He hesitated, then pushed it wide. The room appeared to be empty, but you never knew. There were plenty of scumbags who followed gamblers back to their hotel rooms, and forcibly relieved them of their winnings.

'Anybody there?' he called, stepping into the room. The bed was made, and there was no utility cart around, so it couldn't have been the maids. Maybe the door had been left open by accident. He went over to the bureau and tugged open the drawers. His gold cufflinks were still there; so was his Gucci ballpen and five hundred dollars in small bills.

He was just about to turn around and close the door, however, when he heard it softly click shut by itself. A voice said, 'Freeze, buddy. Stay right where you are.'

He stood up straight. In the mirror on top of the bureau, he saw a young man step out from behind the drapes, holding a handgun, .32 by the look of it, although Jack didn't know much about guns.

'Looking for some loose change?' the young man asked him.

'Maybe I should ask you the same question,' Jack replied. The young man came around and faced him. He was pale and thin-faced and haggard, and he was dressed in worn-out denims.

'I'm not looking for trouble,' he told Jack. 'Maybe you should turn around and walk back out of that door and we'll forget the whole thing.'

'I'm not going anyplace,' Jack retorted. 'This is my room.'

'Unh-hunh,' the young man grinned. 'I know whose room this is. This is Mr Druce's room, and you sure as hell aren't Mr Druce.'

'Of course I'm Mr Druce. Who do you think I am?'

'Don't kid me,' the young man told him, raising his pistol higher. 'Mr Druce just happens to be my father; and there's no way that *you're* my father, buddy.'

Jack stared at him. 'Mr Druce is your *father*?'

The young man nodded. 'You sound like you know him.'

'Know him? I *am* him.'



'Are you out of your tree or what?' the young man demanded. 'You're not much older than me. How the hell can you be my father?'

'How the hell can you be my son?' Jack retorted. 'My son is three years old.'

'Oh, yes? Well, that's very interesting. But right now, I think you'd better *vamos*, don't you, before Mr Druce gets back and finds you here.'

Jack said, 'Listen, I think we've gotten our lines crossed here. You must be looking for the wrong Mr Druce. I'm Jack Druce, this is my room, and there's no way in the world you can be my son, because look -'

Jack reached inside his suit for his wallet, and his Kodak photograph of Roddy by the pool. But the young man instantly cocked his handgun and tensed up, and said, "Freeze! Freeze! Keep your hands where I can see them!"

'But if I showed you -' Jack began.

The young man screamed '*Freeze!*' at him, and fired. The bullet hit Jack in the right side of his head, and burst out through the back of his skull. Blood and brains were thrown against the yellow flock wallpaper.

Jack thought, *He's killed me. I can't believe it. The punk's gone and killed me.* He opened and closed his mouth, and then his knees folded up under him and he collapsed on to the floor.

The hotel dwindled away from him like a lighted television picture falling down an endless elevator shaft. Until it winked out.

Shaking, the young man hunkered down beside him, and reached into his blood-spattered coat for his wallet. He flicked through it. Over ten thousand dollars in thousand-dollar bills. Jesus. This guy must've made some killing.

He found a creased Kodak photograph of a small boy next to a swimming pool. He stared at it for a long time. For some inexplicable reason, he found it disturbingly familiar. Must be the guy's son. It was weird, the way that he'd kept on insisting that his name was Jack Druce.

The young man stood up, unsure of what to do next. He couldn't wait here for his father any longer, and he didn't really have to. He'd only come to Las Vegas to ask him for money, and now he had all the money he could possibly want.

He crammed the bills into the pocket of his denim jacket, and stuffed his handgun back into the top of his jeans. He took one last look at the man lying dead on the carpet, and then he left.

He walked along the sidewalk glancing at every middle-aged man who passed him by. He wondered if he would recognize his father if he ever chanced to meet him. He wondered if his father would recognize *him*.

He passed the Golden Lode Casino, and standing on the steps outside was a young boy, no more than seven years old, wrapped in a black Chinese robe. The young boy was smiling to himself, almost beatifically, as if he were a god.

Roderick Druce smiled at him, and the boy smiled back.

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