

"NIGHT WALK"

By Larry Gilbert

The night was delicious. Reaching out to grasp it, his hand was stopped short by the thin wire mesh which always sifted the darkness, screening out its impurities but permeable to the sights, feel and exquisite smells of the night. "They're there," he thought, "waiting for me. I must come."

The air was warm but fresh and the night clear and bright when he closed the screen door behind him. The dusty gray stretch of gravel lay in shadows, its beginning and end both disappearing into inky blackness. Before him, directly across the road, lay the river, obedient for the moment to the short but steep banks which flanked it. At his back he felt the imposing density of the forest, rising up like a bleak wall under the summer sky. Breathing now in short gasps, he pivoted slowly, drinking in all there was to be seen. The moon shivered above, largely obscured by two wispy clouds which drifted across its face. The tree crickets hushed their chirping, waiting for him to choose his path. Even the trees ceased whispering, watching in anticipation. He took a few quick steps up the road, hesitated, then turned and walked down a path leading to the river.

Here the path was clear. It was narrow but well traced along riverside. The soft ground afforded a comfortable, quiet avenue and the river current gurgled contentedly as it rolled over the rocks near the bank. It was easy travel, as if he merely stood there while the path transported him deeper and deeper into a dark world. As he walked, his hearing became accustomed to the night sounds, discerning the soft beating of the current lapping at the rocks along the shore from the sudden ripple of a fish rising for a night-flyer. His senses grew sharper and more instinctual; his feet skimmed the ground lightly, always finding firm ground on which to tread, his hand brushed away branches before they were seen or felt, his eyes sighted objects as they moved among the brush. The very subtlest changes of expression possible accompanied all this. His face was still boyish, but its softness had taken on a tautness; his eyes were the same light blue, but they had become colder, gleaming and piercing the shadows which surrounded him. He still carried his body loosely, but now it

was more like the relaxed jog of a skilled tracker, skipping lightly over fallen stumps and brush which hindered his progress, ever steadfast in his course.

The path led on evenly for another mile and then began to disintegrate. From now on the brambles would be thicker, the path narrower, the footing more treacherous. Clouds were blowing in and the night sky was becoming darker, the silent world was closing about him tighter and tighter. Looking to the river, he saw that the white specks of froth which swirled in its current were keeping pace with his advance. It made him wonder if he too wasn't one with them, being swept to his destination by irresistible forces. He lengthened his stride, attempting to assert his individuality, but the added darkness and the gnarled underbrush held him back. The only alternative was to lessen his gait and allow the river to scurry by. With this slower rate of travel he could no longer maintain the sensual glow which had so far supported him. Stripped of its vitality, he felt perplexed, confused, lost in the jumble of shadows which clustered about him. With a few more quick strides, however, he burst loose from the snarl of branches, vines and darkness and stood quietly on the edge of a smooth sand bar which jutted out into the river, eyeing the blackness with nervous anticipation.

"That you, Mark?" a voice hissed from the far edge of the bar.

"Yea, that's me" Mark returned, squinting in the direction of the voice.

"We'd nearly given ya up, boy. Jed and me were just hunching up to see . . ."

"Where are you?" the boy interrupted impatiently. "I can't see a thing in this inkpot. Stand up, will you?"

"What's the matter fella?" a second voice chuckled maliciously. "Fraid of the dark?"

"No!" Mark blurted, "just want to see what you are up to."

Dimly discernible in the night, a tall slender figure arose from the sand near the edge of the bar, silhouetted by the dim reflection of the moon in the water behind it. Even though he could not see clearly, Mark could imagine Luke's appearance. It would be the same as that of their first and all of their subsequent meetings; dirty leather cowboy boots, black levis, and a short black vest over a grimy white tee shirt. Despite the darkness, Mark studied Luke's faint outline carefully, looking for any sign of nervousness or tension. Finding none, he

walked slowly toward the tall, dark figure, feeling his stomach tingling with an odd lightness, as if freed of gravity, and his face began to itch as sweat broke out on his forehead.

"Get up, jackass" Luke said as he nudged a formless shape lying below him on the sand, "little old Mark's ready to go to town."

The lightness in Mark's stomach tingled sharply with these words, as if sparks were shooting from the middle of it, extinguishing themselves only when they had reached his outmost layer of flesh. His knees felt elastic, seemingly wanting to buckle and spill out of his mouth the sparks which crackled in his gut.

"About time," Jed chortled, rising. "I was beginning to feel like a crawdad, hunched up in that damn sand. Besides, my bottle's empty—gotta go fill up."

Jed's face, with its scruff of black beard, was nearly indistinguishable in the dark. This relieved Mark. He hated Jed's eyes. They were sunken into his narrow head within scarcely a quarter inch of each other and were nearly black, glinting with the steely hardness and vacant stare of alcoholism. He too was shabbily dressed. A filthy sweatshirt, cut off at the arms and bearing the incongruous title *Notre Dame*, covered his thick chest. He too wore black levis, but on his feet were a pair of ragged black sneakers.

"Here, have some of mine" said Luke, revealing a stout flask inside his vest. Jed's mouth broadened into a grin. He reached out and took the flask lovingly in his huge hands.

"Come'ere, baby, and give me a kiss," he said, as he raised the bottle to his lips.

"Take off the cap first, you lunkhead," said Luke, grabbing the container and spinning off its top neatly. "Try her now."

"That's better," Jed gurgled while gulping down two mouthfuls of heavy smelling liquid, "that'll put some fire in me for Sally to quench."

"Sally?" asked Mark. "Is she the one, Luke?"

"Shore nuff, sonny boy, she's the one that'll take your edge off . . . for a price, of caws."

Mark stared at him uncertainly. "What do you mean, 'for a price'? I gave you your money this morning", he said slowly.

"Prices have gone up. Inflation, you know. Jed and me went over and spent our part of your money on a couple of pints, and presto! right before our eyes they inflated clear into fifths before we could

get them out of the store. Storekeeper he naturally charges us a full fifth's worth, so's we was out of money for old Sally. Don't blame us, though, it was inflation, warn't it, Jed."

"That very thing," chuckled his crony, "that's wot done it, the very thing!"

"Bullshit," mumbled Mark.

Jed took one step forward, changing his grip on the flask. "What's that you say, boy?"

"Nothing, I was just wondering if I had enough cash."

"Why shore you do," Luke offered, "a rich boy like you got's lot'sa dough. Tell you what, though, since your money bought it you can have a drink."

"Like hell he can," answered Jed as he brought the flask down from his lips with a snap, "tain't hardly enough for us."

"I don't want any, anyhow," said Mark.

A faint flicker passed through Jed's eyes. He debated a while, then thrust out the flask to the boy.

"Have a drink on me, a nice long drink. Ain't afraid of a little whiskey, are you?"

Mark hesitated, looking over to Luke, who only grinned back at him stupidly. "Nope, I reckon I'm not" he replied, as he extended a shaky hand to the offered bottle.

"That a boy, that a boy," whispered Jed to Mark as the boy put the flask to his lips and tilted his head back sharply, "that a way to put the fire in."

"C'mon, let's go" said Luke, "we kin all git fired up on the way to to Sally's place."

The three turned toward the dark woods, where a thin path ran up the bank. Having gained the top they started off at a steady pace through a pasture that led to the same gravel road which ran past Mark's house. Luke had parked his car, a rusty old Cadillac, alongside the road adjacent to the pasture. They got in and Luke drove down the road, away from Mark's house, leaving a billow of dust which was gratefully swallowed by the blackness which swirled about them.

Turning onto blacktop, the trio headed south until they reached the tiny village which supplied the surrounding farms and summer cottages. All of its stores were located on Main Street, a half mile stretch of chuckholed asphalt. Scattered loosely around this street were about one hundred homes, drab and simple, but well kept. Luke

drove through the town and turned left at the last narrow avenue, stopping in front of an old gray-shingled house which stood well back from the road.

"We're home," Jed hollered drunkenly, his breath heavy with the smell of whiskey, "everybody out and go kiss mother."

Mark gazed at the tired-looking house. The resolve which had carried him this far began to crumble, and his legs failed to respond to his commands to move. Jed solved the problem for him, however.

"Up and at them, Mark old boy. She ain't coming down here, you'll have to go git her" he said, reaching into the car and yanking Mark out onto his feet.

Jed escorted him up the broad, cracked sidewalk. They both staggered to the front porch, Jed reeling drunkenly, and Mark weakened by the sickening feeling in his stomach, a combination of alcohol and fear. Luke sat in the car, pulling contentedly at his flask.

"Open up," Jed yelled, beating his fists on the screen door, "You open up in there! This here young man got a date with Sally!"

The door opened. A medium sized man with gray hair stood in the open door, a small black revolver in his hand. "You're drunk, Jed" he said methodically. "I told you before I don't want you coming here drunk."

Jed swayed uncertainly in the twilight, his jaw moved up and down but no words came from him. Finally he coughed violently, and leaned on the wall for support. "Aw, Major," he began, "You knows I wouldn't go get drunk and come here. I jest had a few drinks with me pal here, Mark, what's come to pay Sally a little visit."

The man turned his eyes on Mark. "How old are you, boy?" he asked.

Mark felt his stomach turn completely over now. He wanted to run for the porch rail and puke up the whole ghastly night, his whole wretched existence, too, for that matter. He looked over at Jed, who shot him a groggy wink from one of these hated eyes. His own eyes were trapped by his. In their cold, vacant stare, he saw the meanness and triviality of his own life. He fancied that his own eyes now appeared as Jed's, black and brutal.

"How old, boy?" The man's question broke the spell which locked his eyes to Jed's.

"Sixteen, sir," he answered, beginning to gasp loudly for air, "and I don't want to go into your stinking whore house, sir, I don't

want to!" Mark's tears now flowed freely and his breath came in rattling gasps.

The man called Major turned on Jed, his eyes blazing. "You degenerate moron," he said, "if you ever come here with another green kid again, I'll see that you never have a chance to make the same mistake a third time. It's your type of idiot blunders that could put me in jail, and I don't relish that. Now get out and take this boy away with you!"

Jed looked at the gun, then at Mark. Dully he turned around and slowly staggered toward the car. The man in the doorway waved his gun at Mark, who turned and followed Jed.

"Wal', that certainly was quick," laughed Luke from the driver's window. "How'd you like Sally, sonny boy? Pretty nice stuff, huh?"

"Shut up," snapped Jed, "the kid blew it and that son-of-a-bitch ordered us off the place."

"Which son-of-a-bitch?" asked Luke, puzzled.

"That Major son-of-a-bitch," shot back Jed, slamming his foot in disgust into the side of the car. "Owwww," he cried, "god'am your god'am car, it's broke my toes."

"Any fool what kicks a car with tennis shoes on deserves to git them broke," rejoined Luke. "Git in the car and let's git out. You too Mark, git in."

Mark looked about him, unheeding for the moment of Luke's command. As he furtively scanned the block, he noticed how alone he was, save Jed and Luke. He wanted to escape, but of all the houses about him the one he had just left was the only one in which any light could be seen and it terrified him to think of himself fleeing along in the night. It was well after midnight now, and the darkness was still as thick as when they had stood on the sand dune. Only now, the night inspired him with fear. Rather than penetrating the darkness, his eyes could only behold leering shadows, with unknown shapes creeping behind them. His hands clutched and relaxed spasmodically at his sides. Again he turned toward the car, eyeing it disdainfully. He looked hopefully toward the main road, but all there was darkness too. Casting a frightened glance about him, he sprawled disheartedly into the front seat between Luke and Jed, the same arrangement in which they had arrived.

"Damn punk kid," Jed was muttering angrily, "ruined my chance to waltz with Sally!" He paused, then added, in a faint whining tone, "I need a dance bad, too. I most shorely do."

"Don't worry none, Jed," Luke said with an odd grin playing across his stubby face. "I know where we kin find a first-rate dancin' partner and we won't have to pay a cent neither." Luke leaned over heavily against Mark and his voice instinctively lowered to a whisper. "I've had my eye on that little waitress, the one at the *Royal Oaks*. She'll be walking home at one; that's about a half hour from now. She lives alone, and no one'll know if we was to take her to a little party of our own. What do you say?"

Jed's face took on a momentary sober expression. "That little bitch," he said through clenched teeth, "she nearly scratched my eyes out that time I grabbed her—called me a filthy pig, too! It'd serve her right to get herself raped, god'am wench!"

"What about you Mark?" Luke asked deadpan. "Are you game?"

"What do we need him for?" screamed Jed, "He damn near got me shot back at the house!"

Luke looked over at Mark, his eyes narrowing another grin starting to spread across his haggard face. "Two reasons" he said dryly. "First I jest wanna do old Mark a favor. I wanna show him what this world's really like. Not like the world his fancy, big-city family shows him, but the real one. All he sees is sugar and candy. Lot's of nice things—and all you got to do is ask for them. Well I see something I want, only it ain't no sugar ner candy and I ain't gonna git it by asking. If I want it I gotta take it myself. That's the real world, Mark old boy, and it's time you learned how to take, if yer gonna live in it. Anyway," he said turning to Jed, "the cat's out of the bag already. If we're gonna keep him from the police, then we're best to git him in this, too. Whad'cha think Mark, would your family want you in jail for rape? How'd your ma like to think of her little boy screwing some helpless broad, she'd be might proud, wouldn't she?"

"Yea . . . yea!" Jed responded, the whole plot only just beginning to soak through his foggy consciousness. "Why Mark here is our golden ticket to sin. We kin get away with anything long as he's with us."

"I don't want to go; I won't," Mark sobbed. "I don't want to hurt nobody. I don't want no girl—I don't want one now or never. Go ahead, but take me home first, I promise I won't tell nobody."

Jed slammed his hand over Mark's mouth, his powerful thumb and fingers nearly squeezing the insides of Mark's cheeks together. "You'll go," he said, his voice oddly high and tremulous. "You'll go or you might accidentally fall in the river. Now you don't want that to happen

do you? Besides you gotta be around to clear our good names if something goes wrong and they track us down. Who'd ever believe a lawyer's son would be one of three what raped that waitress? Huh? So you jest relax and git ready to enjoy yourself. She's a nice little broad, she is," he added softly to himself, "nice, very very . . . nice."

"No need to worry about it anyway, Mark," said Luke, starting the car, "we ain't gonna hurt her none, jest use her a little, like God made her to be used. Besides we're gonna pull this off jest as slick as goose greese. She won't even know what hit her." He began to laugh, She won't even know what hit her. He began to laugh, nearly hysterically. "Jest look at it this way, Mark," he wheezed between laughs, "God put the fruit on the earth so it could be picked and eaten when it gits ripe. Think of this here waitress as a piece of fruit that's ripe and ought to be picked. Now some folks' God would say it ain't right to take this gal like you was picking apples. But not me and Jed's God, He says apples and people are jest the same, put on this here earth for people what wants them and ain't afraid to take them. Ain't that so, Jed?"

"That's our God all right," Jed mused softly, "That's the very one we know and trust. But say," he cried, sitting up in the seat, "jest how we gonna pull this off?"

"Easy," began Luke. "The street she has to walk down don't have no lights, and at one in the morning, won't be nobody up. You and me hide behind those hedges at the Thomas house, Mark stays in the car. When she walks by you, slip a rag around her mouth and gag her. I'll be right with you and throw a pillowcase over her head before she can see who's got her, then I'll grab her arms and tie them behind her back. By then Mark'll come up with the car; we throw her in and take off for the country. When we're done with her we'll leave her there—someone'll pick her up in the morning—and she won't be none the worse for wear. What do you say, Mark? We ain't doing no harm to nobody, jest picking the fruits of the earth." Luke gasped with choking laughter at this last statement.

Mark had been sitting with his head in his hands, feeling his stomach growing sicker as he listened to Luke's words. "Sure," he said in a faltering tone, raising his head and looking slowly and dejectedly from side to side, "seeing as how I don't have no choice I might as well settle back and enjoy myself. I planned on getting my first woman tonight. This way's just as good as the other."

"I thought you'd see my point," Luke said, satisfied with his powers of persuasion.

It was ten before one when they arrived in front of the Thomas home. Luke parked the car on the same side of the street, so that he and Jed would be between Mark, in the car, and the girl. They waited until about ten minutes after one, then the crisp clear staccato click of a woman's high heels could be heard making its way through the murky darkness.

Mark heard, and he gripped the steering wheel of the car tighter and tighter, biting his lower lip until the blood came. The sound of the woman's heels resounded louder and louder in his ears. The whole night seemed to echo the sound as it bore down on him, as if it wanted to squeeze his ears together by the sheer force of its volume, crushing his brain into a pulpy, insensate mass. He looked about him at the world of darkness. Jed's eyes seemed to glare at him from their hiding place, trying to usurp his own eyes and perpetually discolor his own perceptions with those Jed saw in his dirty, drunken world. He felt Luke's God lurking behind every shadow, menacing and terrifying his whole existence, leering maniacally at him from the shadows. His mind conjured an image of their god; huge, satanic, with eyes staring emptily forward, a thousand-fold more hideous than Jed's.

"Light, light," his brain screamed amidst the blackness which surrounded him as the sound of those clicking heels kept coming closer, almost abreast of the hedge which concealed Luke and Jed, "my world needs light!"

Saying this, he felt his hand on the car's instrument panel. Unconsciously, he pulled out on the headlight switch, bathing the scene in brightness. As he turned the ignition he could see the woman's shout etched in her features, but not yet escaped from her mouth. He felt his foot plunge the gas pedal to the floor and as he threw the car into gear, he saw Luke and Jed's faces contorted with hatred and surprise. The car shot forward, jumping the curb with a loud thump directly under his seat. Luke's flask cracked the window near his head and he heard at last the waitress' piercing scream as the car mowed down Luke and Jed and plowed through the hedge, continuing down the road.

Mark wiped his fingerprints from the car and let it roll off the bank into the river, about five miles below his parents' cottage. As he walked home the night was still dim and foreboding, but he felt a sympathy with the silent world which loomed about him, once more, the shadows held no terror.