

# One of the Best

By Samuel McCoy

*A story of a man who could not win until there was nothing left to lose*

On the broad stairway Ribberson heard a whisper in his ear: "Go roun' da corn'. Take da black car." He did not turn

**C**REWS, the city editor, beckoned to Ribberson, as he came in. He went over to the desk. In his hands Crews held a sheaf of clippings. "Read the paper?" said the editor. "This diamond-smuggling story?"

"Sure," said Ribberson.

"Well," said Crews, "take a slant at these and hand 'em back to me. All I want you to do is to go over to see Milmaroff—"

He stopped suddenly and looked up. "Say," he demanded, "you been drinkin', Ribberson? You smell like a distillery."

Ribberson flushed. "I had one, just before I came in. What about it?"

"Just this about it," said Crews. "You know the rules. One more break and you're done. Now get me. Lay off it."

Ribberson was silent.

"Go over and see Milmaroff," Crews resumed. "He's president of this Amalgamated Jewelry Importers' League. Ask him all about this smuggling business. We'll give it a play along with the news story. Got me?"

Ribberson took the clippings held out to him, walked to his desk, and glanced through them, raging inwardly. A deck hand from one of the big passenger liners in port had been trailed by Customs men until they had seen him met by another man. They had arrested the two and taken from them a package of diamonds. The clippings hinted hopefully that the arrests would lead to the discovery and breaking-up of a gigantic diamond-smuggling syndicate. Ribberson skimmed through them with eyes suffused with rage. He didn't have to take any lip from that squirt, Crews. Why should he have to run around like a trained dog, at the whim of that fellow? Bawling him out in front of the whole office, when he was stone sober! The clippings danced before his eyes.

He found the building in which were Milmaroff's offices to be a vast temple on the Avenue, whose street floor was occupied by Delaney's. A stout woman in furs squeezed herself pantingly from the doors of a limousine at the curb as Ribberson reached the spot, and, escorted by her own servant and the doorman at Delaney's, wheezed across the pavement and into the great bronzedoored shop. Ribberson looked, fingered the ten cents in his pocket, and spat.

Milmaroff's offices were on the eighteenth floor. Milmaroff greeted him affably. Ribberson hated him. He looked too prosperous. But he smothered his inward rage and began to ask questions. The jeweler entered into an explanation of the various steps in the diamond industry. Two or three times

a year, he said, he visited Antwerp and Amsterdam, to buy.

"After I've made my selections," he was saying, "at the diamond broker's offices, the stones are usually repapered. Next—"

"Excuse me," said Ribberson, "what do you mean by 'repapering' a diamond?"

"Putting fresh papers on the lot," said Milmaroff.

Ribberson was still puzzled. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I don't get you. Why do you have to put papers on diamonds? What sort of papers?"

**T**HE jeweler looked at him in surprise. "Why," he said, "haven't you ever seen a diamond paper?"

"No," said Ribberson. He felt angry. Perhaps everyone else in the world—everyone with money; lucky people, people who owned cars and had servants, and who thought nothing of going into a shop and buying a diamond bracelet or a pearl necklace—might know what a diamond paper was; but he didn't; he had never had enough money in his life

to dream of entering a jewelry shop. The jeweler's surprised question infuriated him. Why should he, Ribberson, know what a diamond paper was?

"No," he said, flushing.

"Wait a moment," said the jeweler. He got up and went into the adjoining room. Ribberson was left alone in the little private office. He waited.

In a moment, the jeweler returned. In his hands he carried a large leather wallet. He sat down. He pulled out the extension leaf above the top drawer of his roll-top desk.

"Here," he said.

He placed the wallet on the leaf between him and Ribberson. The wallet was about ten inches long, four inches wide, three inches thick. Its leather was thin, soft from much handling, somewhat shabby. The jeweler untied its strings and folded its leather flaps carefully back.

There was revealed a long row of little white paper packages, each about four inches wide, two or three inches high. They seemed almost flat. The jeweler ran his finger swiftly over them and selected one at random. He pushed the wallet to one side and opened the little paper package.

It had looked, to Ribberson, like a small envelope; but now he saw that it was not an envelope. It was merely a double sheet of white oilskin paper, folded to a rectangle. Its flaps were not gummed.

"There," said the jeweler. "That's a diamond paper."

He unfolded it. In a crease of its

folds were a number of very small and very brightly glittering objects. They looked, to Ribberson, like bits of glass.

"Those are small stones," said the jeweler. "About fifty to the carat."

He folded up the paper again, replaced it carefully, selected and opened another. In this, the glittering stones were considerably larger, and fewer in number. He picked one up deftly and held it toward Ribberson.

"That's a three-carat stone," said Milmaroff. "Worth about eight hundred dollars."

**H**E UNFOLDED one after another of the little papers. In each one danced the little stones, glittering with flashes of blue and red. Ribberson, watching with fascinated eyes, felt a curious faintness.

"What's the total value of all those diamonds in those papers?" he managed to say.

"Oh," said the jeweler casually, "two or three hundred thousand dollars."

He folded the wallet up again, tied up its flaps, and took it back to its safe in the outer room.

"Diamonds don't take up much room," he added, as he returned. "Three pounds of diamonds, you know, average value, would be worth approximately a million dollars. That's why they're so tempting an article to smuggle. You can put a three-pound package into your coat and nobody would ever know that you were carrying a million dollars, or even that you were carrying anything at all."

Ribberson felt a new rush of unreasoning rage. The fingers of his left hand, in his trousers pocket, clenched upon the only coin they found there—the dime. His eyes rested upon the frayed cuff of his right sleeve.

"Could I?" he said.

Illustrated by  
R. L. Lambdin



His voice was level; but he felt that he might easily scream out curses. He gripped himself. He smiled.

"Now, about this smuggling game, Mr. Milmaroff," he said. "You say they actually get away with a good deal of it?"

AN HOUR later, having had all his questions answered, he stuffed his penciled notes into his pocket and stood up.

"Thanks, Mr. Milmaroff," he said, "I've got plenty for the story."

The traffic stream held him as he started back across the Avenue. He stepped back just in time to escape an arrogantly flashing limousine and fancied he caught a smile of contempt upon the granite face of its liveried driver. The stream of haughty motors, endless, crawled past him slowly; and as he waited furiously, his hatred of all that was rich grew with every moment.

A drink would go good. Yes, but where was he going to get it? You can't get a drink with a dime. No, you certainly can't.

Wait a minute—how about Big Nick Vitali? Big Nick certainly owed him a drink. Wouldn't he have been in awful bad if he hadn't been tipped off that time? Sure, Nick ought to come across. If a bird that handles a couple of million gallons of alcohol a year can't come across with one drink for a friend—why sure!

RIBBERSON walked rapidly across town to a ramshackle building in the West Forties. Big Nick's trucking offices were on the ground floor; his own offices, Ribberson knew, were on the floor above. He climbed up the creaking wooden stairs.

In the dingy anteroom lounged two heavy-set men. Ribberson knew who

they were—Big Nick's regular body-guard.

"Hello, Louis," said Ribberson. "Hello, Salvatore."

The two men nodded, without smiling.

"The big boss in?" inquired Ribberson.

"Sure," said one of the men. "Go on in."

Ribberson laid his hand on the half-opened door of the inner room and went in. Big Nick was seated as usual at his battered desk.

"Hello, Joe," he said. "How you was, huh?"

Ribberson attempted an equal familiarity. "Where do you get that 'Joe' stuff?" he inquired. "That ain't my name." He grinned.

Vitali laughed. "Sure, that's all right, Joe," he said. "How's th' business?"

"Oh, all right," said Ribberson. "Say Nick, how about a little drink?"

"Sure," said Nick. He reached into a drawer of the desk and pulled out a bottle and a pair of glasses. "Sure, we own th' place! Help yourself, Joe."

Ribberson's relief was profound. He reached out a trembling hand and seized the bottle. They drank.

Footsteps sounded on the creaking stairs, and one of the men in the anteroom closed the door gently. Nick, with his glass in his hand, listened intently. Then he grinned. "Friend of mine," he explained, as he recognized the visitor's voice. "Excuse."

He went out, leaving the door ajar. Ribberson heard his jovial greeting. The newcomer's voice was low, but Ribberson caught an occasional word. The conversation went on, interminably. Ribberson eyed the bottle hungrily. His hand crept toward it.

The conversation in the outer room went on. Ribberson drank again. What was the visitor saying? Apparently he

was trying to sell Big Nick something. Vitali was stubbornly, but pleasantly, refusing. "No," he kept repeating. "No. Nothin' doin', Joe."

"He calls everyone Joe," thought Ribberson bitterly. He reached again for the bottle. "Look at all I've done for him," he reflected. "And he calls me Joe." He drank.

THE visitor's guarded voice went on, persistent. Big Nick's own voice rose a little. "I ain't goin' to buy no more stock, I tell you," he said. "I got three hunner' grand to the good now, an' I ain't goin' to lose no more, see? Glass is differen', Joe. I'm puttin' it in glass, see?"

Ribberson looked at his own glass. It was empty.

Nick came back into the room. Ribberson grinned at him. Nick's eyes rested on the bottle, then on Ribberson. The eyes suddenly grew very narrow and very cold. Ribberson smiled uneasily. "What do you say we have a drink, Nick?" he said.

The man laughed. "Sure," he said. "Sure. Let's have a drink."

He beckoned to the two men in the outer room. One of them kept a hand under Ribberson's arm until he got down the stairs and into the street. Then he released his grip and Ribberson walked away.

Ribberson's fury against the world grew as he walked the five squares to the Planet office. It now included Big Nick Vitali. Where did that big bum think he got off? A nice way to treat a friend who had kept him out of the pen! He walked into the office muttering.

Crews saw him as he entered the room, saw him as he stood there swaying. Crews got up and went over to him.

"You're through," he said to Ribber-

son. "I warned you. Now get out." Ribberson steadied himself against a desk. He breathed heavily. He wanted to hit Crews. But it seemed unwise to let go of the desk. "You're smart fella', ain't yuh?" he said.

Crews looked at him wearily. "Oh, go on home," he said. "Beat it. The cashier will have everything that's coming to you—whenever you're sober enough to come and get it."

For a long time Ribberson stood there swaying, the hatred choking him.

And in some way or other he got to his own room. How, he never knew. He found himself lying across his bed. It was afternoon. Without lifting his head he could see the alarm clock hanging on its nail against the tattered wall-paper. He groaned. He must get up and get to the office. Office? He didn't have any. Crews...

Slowly it came back to him. He looked at his clothing. It was muddy. Well, it didn't make any difference. He was through. No job. No money. Nothing...

SHAKING, he got up and went out. There was only one place to go—Big Nick's. Every nerve in his body shrieked aloud for whisky. Big Nick must give it to him.

Big Nick pulled the bottle from the desk without a word, but did not extend it to him. Ribberson wanted to scream. "For God's sake, Nick, let me have a drink, will you?" he said huskily.

But Vitali sat motionless and looked at him curiously. Finally he spoke.

"Sure," he said. "Sure, I'll give you a drink. But lissen, Joe—yuh get it when I'm through talkin'. Get me?"

Ribberson sat down suddenly and buried his face in his hands.

Vitali, still sitting sluggishly in his chair, pulled open another drawer in the desk. From it he took two objects. One was a black magazine pistol. He



"What do you suppose I got m' bag fixed this way for?" he demanded, angrily. He threw the light satchel on the desk, swaying unsteadily



laid it on the desk. The other was a package. He opened it.

"Look here," he commanded.

Ribberson looked toward the man dully. He saw the gun. He saw the package beside it. Vitali lifted the contents of the package and fluttered them in his thick dirty fingers, under Ribberson's eyes. They were bank-notes, yellow-backs. Nick counted them, aloud.

"Fi'ty, one hunner', one-fi'ty, two hunner'—how you like 'em, Joe? I got fi' grand here, see, Joe? Fi' grand. You wan' 'em? Lemme tell yuh w'at you do, Joe—me, I'm goin' over to the old country, do a little business, see? I go on one ship, I pay for your ticket on anudder ship. I do my business, then we come back on same ship. W'en we get back here, you help me carry some little stuff up here to my office, see? An' then you gets dis fi' grand, see? That's all, Joe. Easy mon, huh? Sure! But, lissen, you lay off da booze all da time, see? Now, w'at you say?"

**R**IBBERSON was breathing heavily. Five thousand dollars! Why? Why was Vitali offering him money? Three hundred grand—three hundred thousand dollars. In glass. He struggled painfully to remember. In glass! Milmaroff. Little flashing bits of glass. Why, yes! What was it that Milmaroff had said? Twenty per cent—twenty per cent duty. Twenty per cent of three hundred thousand. That's sixty thousand. Big Nick will save sixty thousand dollars. Sixty thousand. Five thousand. Five thousand for Ribberson. But a drink. A drink. He felt deathly sick. He looked up at Big Nick, nodded, and collapsed.

Ribberson, with an effort, forced himself to remain standing quietly at the ship's rail.

He tried to swallow. His throat was dry. But he wouldn't have a drink. No, it wasn't time yet. And not now, anyway—not now, with Big Nick so close to him. Big Nick would smell it, and then the whole deal would be off. No, better wait till the stuff was delivered. There, there go the gangplanks.

Take your time, that's right, take your time. And watch your bag. Watch your bag! Good old bag—same old bag you started out with, when you sailed a month ago, nothing in it but a few dirty collars and those little things you bought in Antwerp. Same old bag that Nick gave you when you started. Nothing to pay duty on—no duty on personal effects. Well, here we go.

Here we go, down the gangplank. It

won't be long now. Funny how heavy your feet feel. Like lead. God, what a lot of people crowding around the foot of this gangplank! A million eyes. Eyes. Who do they think they're looking at? Why don't they mind their own business? Well, let 'em look! See where that gets 'em.

But in that sea of eager faces Ribberson suddenly saw a face he knew. There, over on the right of the crowd. A gray face. An unsmiling face, in which glittered two eyes that were searching for him, Ribberson. The eyes rested on him. Ribberson knew those eyes; they were the eyes of Salvatore, Big Nick's bodyguard.

To the left, in the crowd below, he saw another pair of eyes watching him. Cold eyes, unwinking eyes. Big Nick's second spaniel. The man that croaked Greiner, when Greiner's mob tried to chisel Big Nick's racket. Ribberson shuddered.

So that was it, was it? So Big Nick had put both his spaniels on him, to make sure that he didn't get away from Nick. Well, what of it? He had no intention of getting away.

Ribberson watched both men out of the tail of his eye as he carried his bag over to the R-S-T section for examination. He started violently, at a touch on his elbow. Turning, he saw that an inspector had reached him.

"All right, mister," said the man pleasantly. "Where's your baggage?" Ribberson indicated the bag at his feet.

"There it is, Chief," he smiled. "I'm no millionaire."

The inspector grinned, then fumbled through the bag.

"Hello, Ribberson!" said a cheerful voice. "What are you covering?"

**R**IBBERSON'S heart missed a beat. He turned quickly. It was Jim Thorley, a reporter for the Planet. Thorley was looking at him oddly.

"Oh!" said Ribberson. "Hello, Thorley."

"You're looking fine," said Thorley. "Where you working now?"

"I'm not working," said Ribberson. "Just got off this boat."

Thorley's eyes widened. "Yeah?" he inquired. "You must have come into money? Good trip? Say, whad'ye know about this tip on Big Nick Vitali? You musta met him, didn't you?"

"No," said Ribberson. "You mean the bootlegger? No, I didn't see him. Was he on this boat?"

"Sure. That's him over there, now.

Look, they're leadin' him off for further examination! The tip is that he bought about a million dollars' worth of diamonds over in Antwerp and is tryin' to smuggle 'em in. They went over him at quarantine with a fine-tooth comb, and ripped up his whole cabin. Nothing anywhere! Didn't you hear it?"

"No," said Ribberson. "I came second cabin. Never even knew he was on board."

"Well," said Thorley, carelessly, "I've got to be going. So long, Ribberson."

"So long."

Thorley waved a hand and moved away through the crowd.

The inspector straightened up. "Okay," he said.

Ribberson picked up his bag and made his way through the confusion and the crowd. His knees felt strange. As he walked down the broad stairway to the street-level he heard a whisper at his ear: "Don't take no taxi here. Cross da street. Go roun' da corn'. Take da black car."

Ribberson did not turn. He walked on. He crossed the street.

Around the corner was a black car, drawn up at the curb. Ribberson got in. One of Nick's men was already sitting there. The second followed Ribberson and sat down opposite him.

**T**HE car started. It went swiftly, darting forward whenever the traffic opened up; but to Ribberson it seemed as if the ride would never end. He didn't like this business. You didn't get what it was worth. A lousy little five grand—and what was five grand? Nothing at all!

The car stopped. "Get out," said one of the men. Ribberson got out.

They went up the steps of a dingy tenement house. The hallway was dark and smelled of garlic. One of the two men went ahead, opened the door, and motioned to Ribberson to enter. He went in.

It was a small room, with a bare and dusty floor, on which stood two or three chairs.

"Seddown," said the man. Ribberson sat down. The man went out. The door closed behind him. Ribberson heard the key turn in the lock.

At the end of two hours, Ribberson heard footsteps coming along the hallway. The key fumbled in the lock. The door swung open. Big Nick Vitali stepped in.

"Hello, Joe," he said, smiling. "Got the stuff, huh?"

Ribberson nodded, unable to speak.

"Well, get busy."

Ribberson staggered to his feet. He picked up the bag, weakly, and placed it on the rickety table, bottom up.

"Here," said Vitali, impatiently, "gimme ya knife."

He ripped the seams open. The leather bottom came off. Beneath it was a layer of soft white cotton batting. Vitali lifted it, disengaged it, and spread it gently flat upon the table. Gently he lifted the upper layer of cotton.

And even in the dull glow of the single electric bulb that dangled from its cord above the table, the sheet of cotton pulsated with a hundred flashes of red and green and blue.

**F**OR a long moment, Vitali gazed greedily at the flashing miracle. Then, rousing himself, he turned toward Ribberson. "Good keed," he said. "I give you da jack."

From an inner pocket he drew out a bundle of bank notes. He passed it to Ribberson.

"Fi' grand. Wanna count it?"

Ribberson managed to smile. "No," he said, "no, that's all right. Well—good-by, Nick. Much . . . obliged."

"Goo'-by."

Ribberson hesitated. "Nearly forgot my bag," he grinned. He picked it up.

"Well, good-by," he repeated.

"Goo'-by," said Vitali. A faint smile was in his eyes.

Ribberson went down the dark hall. The two men who had brought him there stood at the street door. One of them unlocked it and they drew aside to let him pass.

Ribberson went out.

As the door closed behind him, Vitali appeared at the end of the hall.

"All ri', boys," he called to the two men. "Everything's all ri'. Help yourselves." He waved his hand toward the door.

The silent spaniels went out.

But Ribberson did not go home to his rooming-house. That could come later. He turned the corner, turned east, and began walking fast. He knew exactly where he was going. There was one place—if it hadn't been padlocked during his absence—that must be his first stop. One drink, and then he would go on to the room and get the bag stowed away where it would be safe. But, right now, he had to have one. A man can't stand *everything*. One would be enough.

But at nine o'clock he was still sitting at the (Continued on page 42)

## The Inventions of Professor Lucifer G. Butts, A.K.

By RUBE GOLDBERG

PROFESSOR BUTTS SWEEPS THE DUST OUT OF HIS BRAIN AND UNCOVERS AN IDEA FOR A SIMPLIFIED EGG SHAMPOO. NEGLECT TO PAY YOUR BUTCHER BILL AND WHEN BUTCHER COMES AROUND FOR MONEY HE OPENS DOOR(A) WHICH PULLS CORD(B) RELEASING JACK-IN-THE-BOX(C) WHICH PRESSES HEAD AGAINST BUTTON(D), TURNING ON FLASHLIGHT(E). HEN(F) THINKS SUN HAS RISEN AND LAYS EGG(G) WHICH ROLLS DOWN TROUGH(H) AND BREAKS AGAINST YOUR HEAD(I). SUDDEN IMPACT OF EGG CAUSES YOU TO DUCK AND PULL STRING(J) WHICH TILTS SANITARY SOAP-CONTAINER(K) CAUSING SOAP TO SPLASH ON HEAD. YOU REACH FOR SOMETHING WITH WHICH TO STEADY YOURSELF AND GRAB WEIGHT(L) THAT STARTS CUCKOO CLOCK(M), CAUSING PENDULUM(N) TO RUB ATTACHED BRUSH(O) BACK AND FORTH ON HAIR. ON SECOND THOUGHT, IT MAY BE ADVISABLE TO GO TO THE BARBER SHOP FOR YOUR EGG SHAMPOO BECAUSE IF THE CLOCK GETS OUT OF ORDER IT WILL COST MUCH MORE TO HIRE A WATCHMAKER.

