

hand swung down on the corpsman's neck in an ugly rabbit punch. Beck moved like a startled panther, grabbed a chair from beside one of the beds, and was facing Cris in about the time it took for the corpsman to crumple to the floor in a motionless heap. Cris started for the corpsman but stopped when he saw the look in Beck's face. It was a wild, menacing look, completely mad. He shifted the chair in his hands for a better grip, holding it now by one of the legs, brandishing it in one big mitt like an ordinary man would handle a billy. All this time he didn't utter a sound, only stared at Cris, unruffled by the mewling, high-pitched giggling sounds Higgins was making. He stood on a wide base, his legs apart, as if making a last stand for an outpost.

Then he started forward. But slowly, as though his insanity were not geared to sudden, surging, hurried destruction. He advanced slothfully, a little crouched, his arms slightly akimbo, the chair in his fist swinging at his side.

Cris stood his ground, his face shocked and angry. Behind him was a dead end, a blank wall. The ward aisle was narrow, the width of Beck's arms outstretched. The room was constructed to keep its noise. There was nobody on deck to hear! Cris fought the emotional pinwheel of his brain for a way out. He cursed his excitement, lashing around in his mind for a logical approach. He thought of a flying tackle, a direct frontal assault, but Beck was too strong, too fresh, too ready. Beck was trained for this. Hand-to-hand fighting was his forte.

Higgins was suddenly quiet. The room was so silent now he could hear Kramer's wheezing respirations. He's full of mucus again, Cris thought. Without realizing it, Cris had bent forward in a crouch, too, and was backing instinctively away.

He tried to reason with him.

"Beck," he said. "Listen to me."

Beck made no sign of having heard. Higgins made a throaty sound and watched with interest.

"Beck! I'm not the enemy. I'm your friend. We're all friends here. We're all on the same side." Beck's expression was frozen with hate.

"The same side, Beck! Don't you get it? All of us! You, me, Jonas, Klein, Higgins, Kelsey—"

KELSEY!

Cris' eyes shot to Kelsey's bed. The idea hit him full in the face, the crazy fear immediately following as he tried to remember—did he order Kelsey knocked out or was he only sleeping?

He yelled, "Kelsey!"

For a terrible moment there wasn't a move in the bed. Then a slow turning, and Cris knew Kelsey was thinking he'd dreamed it.

"Kelsey! Wake up!"

The figure sat up, eyes blinking.

"Kelsey! Here!"

The comic face turned toward the sound, the eyes bleary then quickly open.

"Hey!" Kelsey said.

The sound of that voice! Beck got it. It was like an answer to Cris' prayer.

Cris needed time. He had to stall Beck. He had to distract him, confuse him. That would be his only barricade.

Beck was on a one-way road, hell-bent for destruction. He was full of hate, a hate which festered in a paranoid fear. Cris was the enemy, a symbol. Cris was authority, imprisonment, punishment, pain, death. Cris was the despicable enemy that must be crushed. Beck would never be free until Cris was smashed dead, until he, a symbol, was pulverized beyond recognition, like all the enemy he had met, bloody and faceless and unredeemably dead.

Kelsey got out of his bed, stood beside it in his bare feet watching Cris, his

face blank.

"Hey!" said Kelsey.

Beck stopped at the sound of the voice, his eyes still on Cris, but listening, his teeth hard together.

"What's going on?" Kelsey said.

Cris met Beck's stare. Somehow he guessed what Beck was thinking. Then he turned to Kelsey and commanded, suddenly, loudly.

"Get the corporal's keys!" he ordered.

Kelsey made no move to leave. He stood leaning against his bed, picking his nose serenely with the air of a disinterested spectator.

Beck was motionless. His murderously focussed hate had blurred slightly at the unexpected but familiar sound of Kelsey's voice. It was what Cris had hoped for, the distraction.

"Kelsey!" he called again.

"Yuh?"

"If he kills me, Kelsey, he'll kill you all. You first. You hear?"

Kelsey seemed dazed. He shrugged.

Cris went on, his eyes meeting Beck's.

"He thinks we're the enemy. He doesn't know the war's over, that we're going home."

"Wouldn't you know it," Kelsey said.

"The big dope!"

"Get the corporal's keys. Bring them here," Cris ordered.

Kelsey moved grudgingly toward the corpsman. "O.K., O.K.," he said.

Beck's eyes shot warily to the side, toward the voice, then back. Cris felt weak, his heart slapping his chest hard. Beck's hand tensed around the chair leg, and the chair began to move slowly upward.

Kelsey was bending over the corpsman's body.

"What keys?" he said without straightening. "No keys here."

"In his hand! Look in his hand!" Cris yelled.

Kelsey found them. "Yeh!" He turned, a silly grin on his face.

"Bring them here!"

Higgins was giggling, but his voice had a hesitant, humorless sound.

"Shut up!" Kelsey spat at Higgins, abruptly changing.

Beck held the chair waist high, moved toward Cris then stopped and abruptly half-turned as Kelsey came up behind him. His big fist looked welded to the chair leg. Kelsey stopped about six feet away, arrested by the look in Beck's face. Now if only he'd keep his mouth shut!

But he didn't.

He looked from Cris to Beck, then to Cris again.

"What's with Hercules?" he said.

"Give him the keys," Cris snapped. And shut up, he wanted to yell. He wanted to yell at Kelsey, for God's sake, keep your trap shut! Don't rile him or he'll make spots on the wall out of us!

But he only repeated the order, more calmly this time. "The keys, Kelsey," he said. "Give Beck the keys!"

Kelsey was looking at the keys. He didn't seem to hear.

A change in Beck's face chilled Cris.

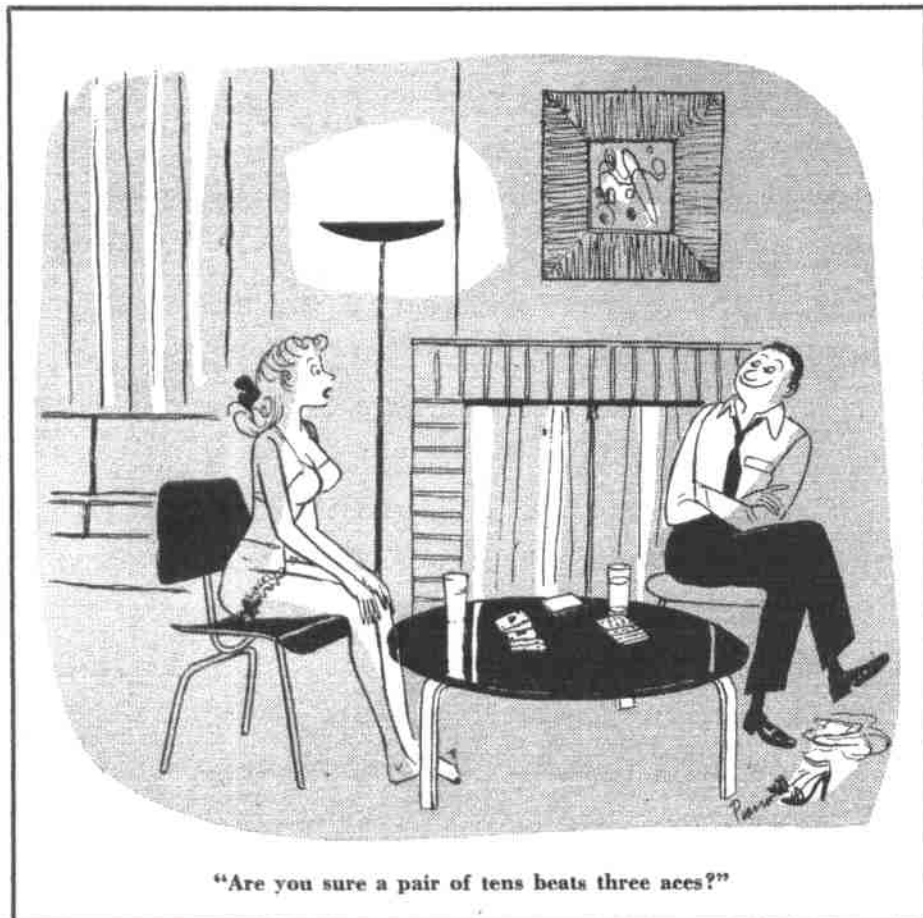
"Give 'em to him!" Cris said tightly. "Kelsey!"

There was a look in Kelsey's face of someone rudely awakened. He turned toward Beck, blinking idiotically, then looked at the keys in his hand. He shrugged, unconcernedly holding out his arm, the ring of keys in the flat of his palm.

"Take it," Cris said, fighting back the urgency in his voice. "It's yours, Beck. Take it and walk the hell out of here."

Beck's eyes were glued to Cris. He made a motion as though to raise the chair for a quick blow.

"What are you waiting for?" Cris said, making his voice steady. Beck took a step



"Are you sure a pair of tens beats three aces?"