

There couldn't be a better tip-off system than mine—it wasn't possible—but he had one!

THE NON-ELECTRONIC BUG

Illustrated by MORROW

By E. MITTLEMAN

I WOULDN'T take five cents off a legitimate man, but if they want to gamble that's another story.

What I am is a genius, and I give you a piece of advice: Do not ever play cards with a stranger. The stranger might be me. Where there are degenerate card players around, I sometimes get a call. Not dice—I don't have a machine to handle them. But with cards I have a machine to force the advantage.

The first thing is a little radio receiver, about the size of a pack of cigarettes. You don't hear any music. You feel it on your skin. The next

thing is two dimes. You stick them onto you, anywhere you like. Some like to put them on their legs, some on their belly. Makes no difference, just so they're out of sight. Each dime has a wire soldered to it, and the wires are attached to the little receiver that goes in your pocket.

The other thing is the transmitter I carry around.

My partner was a fellow named Henry. He had an electronic surplus hardware business, but business wasn't good and he was looking for a little extra cash on the side. It turns out that the other little wholesalers in the loft building

where he has his business are all card players, and no pikers, either. So Henry spread the word that he was available for a gin game—any time at all, but he would only play in his own place—he was expecting an important phone call and he didn't want to be away and maybe miss it. . . . It never came; but the card players did.

I was supposed to be his stock clerk. While Henry and the other fellow were working on the cards at one end of the room, I would be moving around the other—checking the stock, packing the stuff for shipment, arranging it on the shelves, sweeping the floor. I was a regular model worker, busy every second. I had to be. In order to see the man's hand, I had to be nearby, but I had to keep moving so he wouldn't pay attention to me.

And every time I got a look at his hand, I pushed the little button on the transmitter in my pocket.

Every push on the button was a shock on Henry's leg. One for spades, two for hearts, three for diamonds, four for clubs.

Then I would tip the card: a short shock for an ace, two for a king, three for a queen, and so on down to the ten. A long and a short for nine, a long and two shorts for an eight . . . it took a little memorizing, but it was worth it. Henry knew every card the

other man held every time. And I got fifty per cent.

WE DIDN'T annihilate the fish. They hardly felt they were being hurt, but we got a steady advantage, day after day. We did so well we took on another man—I can take physical labor or leave it alone, and I leave it alone every chance I get.

That was where we first felt the trouble.

Our new boy was around twenty. He had a swept-wing haircut, complete with tail fins. Also he had a silly laugh. Now, there are jokes in a card game—somebody taking a beating will sound off, to take away some of the sting, but nobody laughs because the cracks are never funny. But they were to our new boy.

He laughed.

He laughed not only when the mark made some crack, but a lot of the time when he didn't. It got so the customers were looking at him with a lot of dislike, and that was bad for business.

So I called him out into the hall. "Skippy," I said—that's what we called him, "lay off. *Never* rub it in to a sucker. It's enough to take his money."

He ran his fingers back along his hair. "Can't a fellow express himself?"

I gave him a long, hard unhealthy look. *Express* himself? He wouldn't have to. I'd

express him myself—express him right out of our setup.

But before I got a chance, this fellow from Chicago came in, a big manufacturer named Chapo; a wheel, and he looked it. He was red-faced, with hanging jowls and a big dollar cigar; he announced that he only played for big stakes . . . and, nodding toward the kid and me, that he didn't like an audience.

Henry looked at us miserably. But what was he going to do? If he didn't go along, the word could spread that maybe there was something wrong going on. He had to play. "Take the day off, you two," he said, but he wasn't happy.

I thought fast.

There was still one chance. I got behind Chapo long enough to give Henry a wink and a nod toward the window. Then I took Skippy by the elbow and steered him out of there.

Down in the street I said, fast: "You want to earn your pay? You have to give me a hand—an eye is really what I mean. Don't argue—just say yes or no."

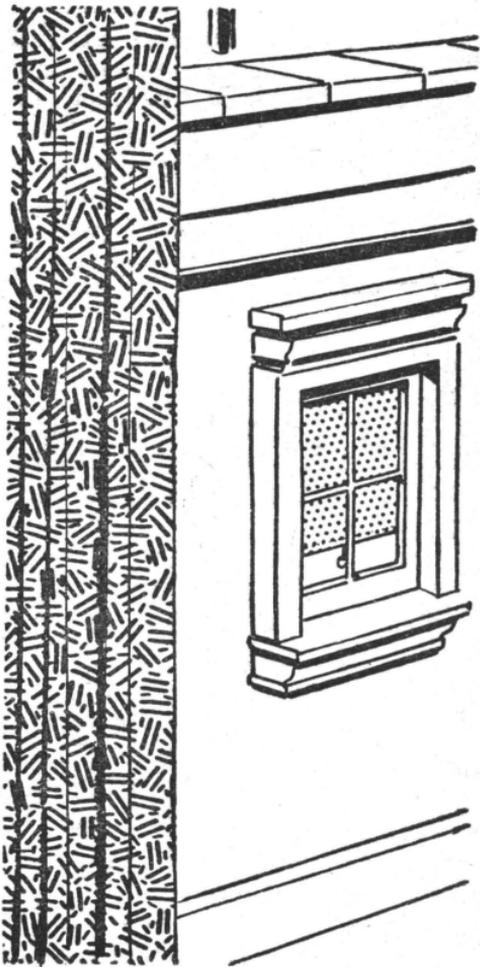
He didn't stop to think. "Sure," he said. "Why not?"

"All right." I took him down the street to where they had genuine imported Japanese field glasses and laid out twenty bucks for a pair. The man was a thief, but I didn't have time to argue. Right

across the street from Henry's place was a rundown hotel. That was our next stop.

The desk man in the scratch house looked up from his comic book. "A room," I said. "Me and my nephew want a room facing the street." And I pointed to the window of Henry's place, where I wanted it to face.

Because we still had a chance. With the field glasses and Skippy's young, good eyes

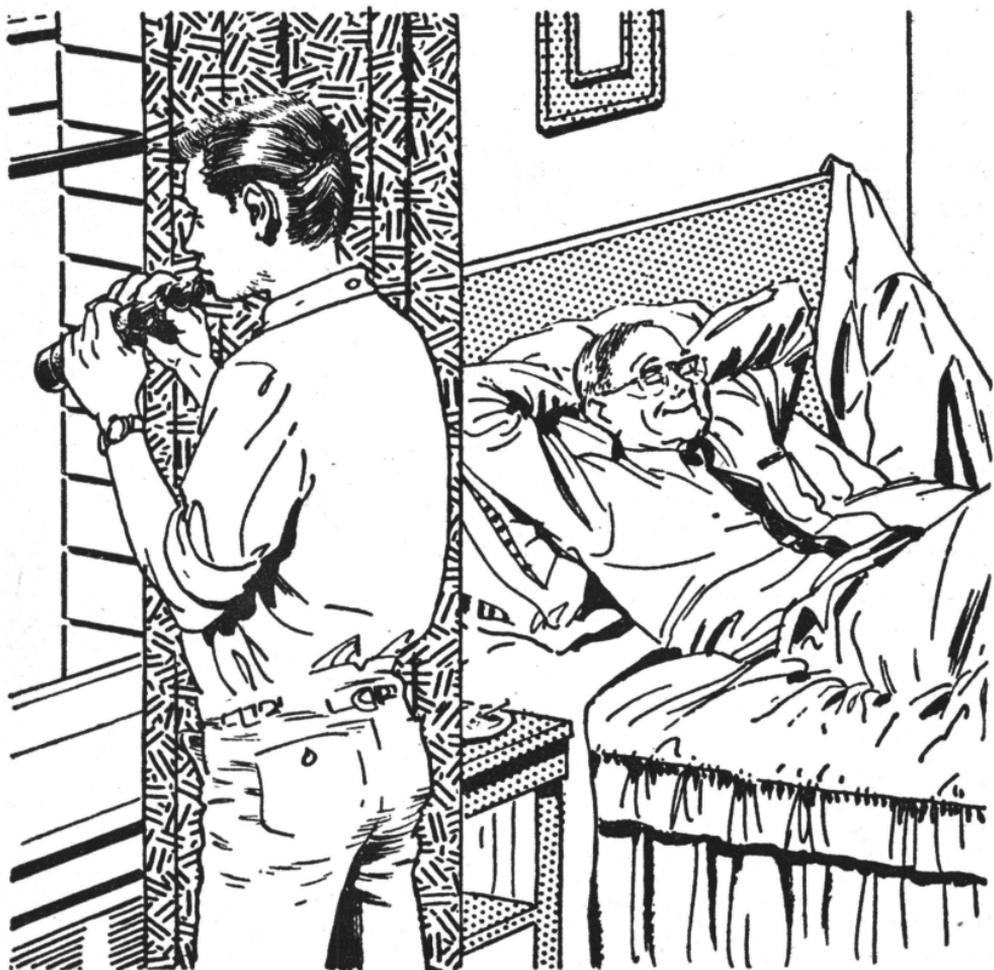


to look through them, with the transmitter that would carry an extra hundred yards easy enough—with everything going for us, we had a chance. Provided Henry had been able to maneuver Chapo so his back was to the window.

The bed merchant gave us a long stall about how the only room we wanted belonged to a sweet old lady that was sick and couldn't be moved. But for ten bucks she could be.

All the time I was wondering how many hands were being played, if we were stuck money and how much—all kinds of things. But finally we got into the room and I laid it out for Skippy. "You aim those field glasses out the window," I told him. "Read Chapo's cards and let me know; that's all. I'll take care of the rest."

I'll say this for him, duck-tail haircut and all, he set-



tled right down to business. I made myself comfortable on the bed and rattled them off on the transmitter as he read the cards to me. I couldn't see the players, didn't know the score; but if he was giving the cards to me right, I was getting them out to Henry.

I felt pretty good. I even began to feel kindly toward the kid. At my age, bifocals are standard equipment, but to judge from Skippy's fast, sure call of the cards, his eyesight was twenty-twenty or better.

After about an hour, Skippy put down the glasses and broke the news: the game was over.

We took our time getting back to Henry's place, so Chapo would have time to clear out. Henry greeted us with eight fingers in the air.

Eight hundred? But before I could ask him, he was already talking: "Eight big ones! Eight thousand bucks! And how you did it, I'll never know!"

Well, eight thousand was good news, no doubt of that. I said, "That's the old system, Henry. But we couldn't have done it if you hadn't steered the fish up to the window." And I showed him the Japanese field glasses, grinning.

But he didn't grin back. He looked puzzled. He glanced toward the window.

I looked too, and then I saw what he was puzzled about. It was pretty obvious that Henry had missed my signal. He and

the fish had played by the window, all right.

But the shade was down.

WHEN I turned around to look for Skippy, to ask him some questions, he was gone. Evidently he didn't want to answer.

I beat up and down every block in the neighborhood until I spotted him in a beanery, drinking a cup of coffee and looking worried.

I sat down beside him, quiet. He didn't look around. The counterman opened his mouth to say hello. I shook my head, but Skippy said, "That's all right. I know you're there."

I blinked. This was a creep! But I had to find out what was going on. I said, "You made a mistake, kid."

"Running out?" He shrugged. "It's not the first mistake I made," he said bitterly. "Getting into your little setup with the bugged game came before that."

I said, "You can always quit," but then stopped. Because it was a lie. He couldn't quit—not until I found out how he read Chapo's cards through a drawn shade.

He said drearily, "You've all got me marked lousy, haven't you? Don't kid me about Henry—I know. I'm not so sure about you, but it wouldn't surprise me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can hear every word

that's on Henry's mind," he said somberly. "You, no. Some people I can hear, some I can't; you're one I can't."

"What kind of goofy talk is that?" I demanded. But, to tell you the truth, I didn't think it was so goofy. The window shade was a lot goofier.

"All my life," said Skippy, "I've been hearing the voices. It doesn't matter if they talk out loud or not. Most people I can hear, even when they don't want me to. Field glasses? I didn't need field glasses. I could hear every thought that went through Chapo's mind, clear across the street. Henry too. That's how I know." He hesitated, looking at me. "You think Henry took eight thousand off Chapo, don't you? It was ten."

I said, "Prove it."

The kid finished his coffee. "Well," he said, "you want to know what the counterman's got on his mind?" He leaned over and whispered to me.

I yelled, "That's a lousy thing to say!"

Everybody was looking at us. He said softly, "You see what it's like? I don't want to hear all this stuff! You think the counterman's got a bad mind, you ought to listen in on Henry's." He looked along the stools. "See that fat little woman down at the end? She's going to order another cheese Danish."

He hadn't even finished talking when the woman was

calling the counterman, and she got another cheese Danish. I thought it over. What he said about Henry holding out on me made it real serious. I had to have more proof.

But I didn't like Skippy's idea of proof. He offered to call off what everybody in the beanery was going to do next, barring three or four he said were silent, like me. That wasn't good enough. "Come along with me," I told him, and we took off for Jake's spot.

That's a twenty-four-hour place and the doorman knows me. I knew Jake and I knew his roulette wheel was gaffed. I walked right up to the wheel, and whispered to the kid, "Can you read the dealer?" He smiled and nodded. "All right. Call black or red."

The wheel spun, but that didn't stop the betting. Jake's hungry. In his place you can still bet for a few seconds after the wheel starts turning.

"Black," Skippy said.

I threw down fifty bucks. Black it was.

That rattled me.

"Call again," I said.

When Skippy said black, I put the fifty on red. Black won it.

"Let's go," I said, and led the kid out of there.

He was looking puzzled. "How come—"

"How come I played to lose?" I patted his shoulder. "Sonny, you got a lot to learn.

Jake's is no fair game. This was only a dry run."

Then I got rid of him, because I had something to do.

HENRY came across. He even looked embarrassed. "I figured," he said, "uh, I figured that the expenses—"

"Save it," I told him. "All I want is my split."

He handed it over, but I kept my hand out, waiting. After a minute he got the idea. He reached down inside the waistband of his pants, pulled loose the tape that held the dimes to his skin and handed over the radio receiver. "That's it, huh?" he said.

"That's it."

"Take your best shot," he said glumly. "But mark my words. You're not going to make out on your own."

"I won't be on my own," I told him, and left him then. By myself? Not a chance! It was going to be Skippy and me, all the way. Not only could he read minds, but the capper was that he couldn't read mine! Otherwise, you can understand, I might not want him around all the time.

But this way I had my own personal bug in every game in town, and I didn't even have to spend for batteries. Card games, gaffed wheels, everything. Down at the track he could follow the smart-money guys around and let me know what they knew, which was plenty. We could even go up

against the legit games in Nevada, with no worry about bluffs.

And think of the fringe benefits! With Skippy giving the women a preliminary screening, I could save a lot of wasted time. At my age, time is nothing to be wasted.

I could understand a lot about Skippy now—why he didn't like most people, why he laughed at jokes nobody else thought were funny, or even could hear. But everybody has got to like somebody, and I had the edge over most of the human race. He didn't know what I was thinking.

And then, take away the voices in his head, and Skippy didn't have much left. He wasn't very smart. If he had half as much in the way of brains as he did in the way of private radar, he would have figured all these angles out for himself long ago. No, he needed me. And I needed him. We were all set to make a big score together, so I went back to his rooming house where I'd told him to wait, to get going on the big time.

However, Henry had more brains than Skippy.

I hadn't told Henry who tipped me off, but it didn't take him long to work out. After all, I had told him I was going out to look for Skippy, and I came right back and called him for holding out. No, it didn't take much brains. All he had to do was come around

to Skippy's place and give him a little lesson about talking.

So when I walked in the door, Skippy was there, but he was out cold, with lumps on his forehead and a stupid grin on his face. I woke him up, and he recognized me.

But you don't make your TV set play better by kicking it. You don't help a fine Swiss watch by pounding it on an anvil. Skippy could walk and talk all right, but something was missing. "The voices!" he yelled, sitting up on the edge of the bed.

I got a quick attack of cold fear. "Skippy! What's the matter? Don't you hear them any more?"

He looked at me in a panic. "Oh, I hear them all right. But they're all different now. I mean—it isn't English any more. In fact, it isn't any language at all!"

LIKE I say, I'm a genius. Skippy wouldn't lie to me; he's not smart enough. If he says he hears voices, he hears voices.

Being a genius, my theory is that when Henry worked Skippy over, he jarred his tuning strips, or whatever it is, so now Skippy's receiving on another frequency. Make sense? I'm positive about it.

He sticks to the same story, telling me about what he's hearing inside his head, and he's too stupid to make it all up.

There are some parts of it I don't have all figured out yet, but I'll get them. Like what he tells me about the people—I *guess* they're people—whose voices he hears. They're skinny and furry and very religious. He can't understand their language, but he gets pictures from them, and he told me what he saw. They worship the Moon, he says. Only that's wrong too, because he says they worship two moons, and everybody knows there's only one. But I'll figure it out; I have to, because I have to get Skippy back in business.

Meanwhile it's pretty lonesome. I spend a lot of time down around the old neighborhood, but I haven't set up another partner for taking the card players. That seems like pretty small stuff now. And I don't talk to Henry when I see him. And I *never* go in the beanery when that counterman is on duty. I've got enough troubles in the world; I don't have to add to them by associating with *his* kind.

END

