

Lips that Touch Liquor: The Gin Buck

by Alicia Aho

Gin Buck

1 ½ ounces gin

juice of half a lemon

top off with ginger ale

It was twilight, and the sky was getting darker even as the lights of civilization were becoming more noticeable in the gloom. The daytime city, with its grit and dust and texture, was disappearing. Soon there would only be electric light and neon and the warm orange glow of streetlamps, and the night city would be born. The night city was all angles and shadows, a strange overlap of garish color and stark black, where only a knife's edge lay between carnage and carnival. The busy places of the daytime city would exhale the last few workday stragglers, and the secretive, illicit places of the night city would open their arms and draw in their throngs and congregants. Sandwich shops were currently in the process of closing, and the speakeasies were in the parallel process of opening. The titular Logan of Logan's Sandwiches saw the last customer out the door and turned the sign to read CLOSED.

This last customer walked through the transforming city. He was fairly tall, but less wide than the average, and his hair was the common mouse-brown that practically guarantees invisibility in a crowd. His hat was charcoal felt, his coat was long and grey, and beneath the coat his suit was dull with age and shiny with wear in the knees and elbows. The bag of sandwiches hung from his right hand -- and it was a beautiful hand, long and graceful and defined, a hand with strength and intelligence and entirely befitting of a pianist.

And thus Mickey Wright arrived at the door of the Elysium.

The door was actually half a door, if that. It was a square, the same width as an ordinary door but only half the height, with an incongruously bright and brassy doorknob, set at ground level in an alley where it would be easy to overlook if you didn't know it was there. The building itself was utterly nondescript, in the way that only city buildings can be: it could have held apartments or offices or rooms full of records, and invited no further scrutiny.

With the bag of sandwiches in hand, Mickey bent down and turned the knob.

With a sharp pull and a crabwise motion, it was possible to open the door and pass through it. Beyond, a set of stairs sloped downward and allowed the room to regain some human proportion. Overstuffed furniture and plaster pedestals crowded the space. In front of a much more imposing door stood a dark-clad youngish man of mournful appearance who filled this room the way minor chords fill a dirge.

"Pumpnickel, right Will?" The lugubrious Will unfolded a smile like consolation, and Mickey tossed him a small log wrapped in greasy paper. "And let's hear the new passphrase, shall we?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Will intoned, "but there's a service going on at the moment. I can't let you disturb the dearly departed." Any person who didn't know better would be instantly shamed by the combination of submission and disdain in his perfectly funereal tone.

"May their spirits rest in peace," Mickey replied with a grin. Will began unwrapping his sandwich and waved him through the second door.

Beyond this second door was the real Elysium. It was currently dressed like a sultana, and a particularly opulent sultana at that. Red velvet and gold tassels were everywhere, like the tentacles of some strange, wealthy monster. Wall sconces and candlelight gilded everything that wasn't gilt to begin with. A long bar stood to the left of the door, to the right were the emerald green gambling tables and Sam the dealer, shuffling tonight's new deck and letting the cards grow familiar with his hands. Sam was no gambler himself, but he

believed in the cards. He always said gamblers saw what they hoped for in the cards, when they should be looking for what was there.

At the back of the Elysium, a fairy circle of glowing white tablecloths gave way to a dance floor, a semi-circular stage, and the battered piano where Mickey spent his evenings.

Joe Barnes was already behind the bar. Tall shelves behind him held bottles of every shape and spirits of every possible shade, from the mind-dissolving bright blues and acid greens to the equally dangerous but cannier caramel browns and diamond clears. Eyeballs in jars of formaldehyde would have admired the slow and dignified rotation of the olives and onions in their cocktail of brine.

Mickey brandished the sandwich bag with unwarranted triumph. "Sandwiches!" he exclaimed. "Sandwiches for all and sundry!" From within his wealth of apparatus Joe grinned at Mickey, and poured him the usual three fingers of whiskey in an old-fashioned tumbler. In turn, Mickey handed over an egg salad. "New doorman seems to be working out," he said. "The funeral home idea was a nice touch. He's got the face for it."

Joe shrugged. "It's not going to matter much how good our cover is, if we've got nothing to cover up." Joe was as tall as Mickey but considerably more gifted in the weight department, although he wore it well, like an old fighter whose best boxing years are behind him but whose muscles are still waiting to see what happens next. He kept his hair close-cropped where it grew at all and his face clean-shaven.

"The cops seized another shipment on its way in last night," said Sam as he walked over and claimed his own chosen thing-between-bread. "Of course, when I say 'seized'--"

"You mean drank," Mickey finished. He had already devoured more than half of a roast beef with cheese.

"Or passed on to the Isle," added Joe.

"Sfn uh cuvs," said Sam, turning over the top card of the deck.

Joe and Mickey stared at him. "What?"

Sam swallowed and then repeated, tapping the card meaningfully, "Seven of clubs."

“Great,” said Mickey. “That clears everything up. Do you always have to be such a cryptic bastard -- and you're just going to shrug that off, aren't you.” And Sam in fact did shrug, though a quirk in the corner of his mouth hinted at something other than prescient remoteness. He was built on a slightly smaller scale than Mickey or Joe, was Sam, and had dark, messy hair like a crow's wing on a rainy day. His nose was sharp and his eyes almost black, which he liked because it added to his sense of mystery. Sam tended toward the mystical, and even though Mickey and Joe mocked him about this with unerring consistency, he took great pleasure in fulfilling as much of the role of fortuneteller as he could. He prided himself on being rather better than average with a prediction. After all, anyone could tell the future with the expressive Tarot -- it took talent to do it with a close-mouthed poker deck.

“We should think about buying some cops of our own, just to keep up with the competition,” Mickey said. “The 7th Street crowd can't have it their own way all the time.” He moved to the piano and idly stroked the keys.

“Between the Emerald Isle and the Vinci family, I'm not sure there's a badge left on the market.”

“I might have an idea,” said Lorelei Upchurch with a smile.

Mickey's nerves all stood up and shouted. Delectable bread, meat, and cheese turned ashen in his mouth as he swallowed the very last bite before slowly turning around to face the woman who had just entered. She stood there with her wavy red hair and her bright green eyes, smiling slightly. Sam turned over the next card, and said, “Two of hearts.”

“Shut up,” said Mickey.

Lorelei turned to Joe and accepted a tall glass of something clear and fizzy. “One of my father's contacts turned up yesterday.” The Upchurch patriarch had been a wildly successful champagne importer, until the Volstead Act cut his livelihood from beneath him. Lorelei had found him the next day in his bathroom, at the end of a rope. From then on, the family had been scattered all over the city.

Lorelei went on: "He's got something rather special that you should look into."

"Anything that keeps me from leaning too hard on those squirrely Brockton brothers is worth looking into," said Joe.

"Good," said Lorelei. "He'll be dropping by here in an hour."

"You're pretty confident," Joe said.

Lorelei merely smiled and turned to Mickey. "Can we go over that new number again? I'm still a little fuzzy on the tune."

"Anything you like," said Mickey, rubbing his hands on his trousers to clean off the remnants of dinner. He sat at the piano while Lorelei leaned idly on the edge of the semicircular stage. Mickey began to play, the notes falling like leaves from the branches of his fingers. He went through the melody once, strong and clear, as Lorelei hummed along under her breath. The second time through, she began to sing.

*"Daddy, o Daddy, come home with me please,
I've had a tad too much to drink;
My heart and my soul have me down on my knees
And my head doesn't know what to think.
My house is so dark, the neighbors aren't home,
There's no one to hear or to see,
There's nobody else in the whole of the world
Just you, a martini, and me.
Come home! come home! come home!
Please daddy, o daddy, come home."*

Lorelei was pretty, and clever, and strong, as though she didn't dare be anything else. Mickey thought it was that uptown childhood of hers, with the boarding schools and the coming-out parties and the expensively dressed types who never ever said what they meant. You couldn't trust that world with anything fragile, or delicate, or tender, or sincere, because at best they would merely smile calmly and watch it die from disinterest. At worst they would kill it with a skeptical eyebrow and a backhanded phrase. So Lorelei Upchurch kept everything fragile and delicate and tender and sincere hidden carefully behind a forthright manner and a cool formal bearing.

Except when she sang. Lorelei's voice was pretty, and clever, and strong -- but it was at the same time fragile, and delicate, and tender, and sincere. Mickey didn't know if he was the only one who could hear it, but he suspected he wasn't. It explained why the Elysium was such a consistent success, even when the booze selection was limited by unfortunate circumstances. People would rather order their second choice and listen to Lorelei sing -- under her stage name of Lola -- than go somewhere else in quest of their first choice.

And she never sang a song exactly the same way twice. Mickey delighted in the challenge of keeping up with her. He was not usually shy -- it was hard to be, in his profession -- but something about this woman knocked his feet out from under him and tied his brain into a thousand helpless knots. So every evening, out of sheer desperation, he made love to her through the music, as though his hands were traveling over her body instead of the piano's black and whites. As though she sang those loving words in that sweet voice directly to him.

But now the waitstaff had arrived and Sam was marshalling his minions of dealers as the first customers of the evening trickled in. Lorelei went backstage left to her cupboard of a dressing room, where a little lipstick and a wardrobe change would transform her into the dazzling Lola. Sam was already showing a couple of shiny-suited young men with eager eyes why trusting your future to the cards was a bad long-term prospect.

Mickey sat at the piano. Almost idly, began to play. He never knew how the melody was going to go until he tried it. His ears took in snatches of conversation, and music came out his hands.

An hour went by. A new note entered the music, and Mickey realized the rhythm had changed as well: six faster beats followed by two slower ones. It was both perfectly controlled and slightly primeval. He looked up.

A large barrel-shaped man in a thick, brimless hat had stepped ponderously up to the bar, and was talking to Joe with glimmering eyes.

From the side of the stage, Lola walked out, her hair shining and her lips as blood-red as her dress. This close, the dress's individual sequins looked like thousands of eyes, staring lidlessly back at Mickey. Onstage, they would wink frantically as though Lola were gowned in rubies. "I heard the music change," she said. "The Finn is here."

Mickey stopped playing and followed her to the bar. He didn't want to miss this.

Once there, Joe kindly refilled Mickey's glass, which by now contained merely the memory of whiskey. Lorelei held out one smiling hand to the barrel-shaped man. "Timo Parvinen, it's always a pleasure."

He removed his hat and bowed over her hand. Next to Lola's shimmering garb, his clothes appeared almost impossibly drab-colored. Neither one appeared to notice or care. "I have missed you, *kulta*," said the Finn, with an indefinably molasses-like accent. "These days one's friends seem farther apart than they should."

"I believe you've met Joe Barnes," Lorelei continued. "And this is Mickey Wright."

The Finn's grip was powerful but not overwhelming. His hands were rough, like burlap, but he used them gently. A good handshake, Mickey decided.

The Finn dropped his hand at exactly the right moment, and said, "I would like you all to taste this." A flask emerged from Parvinen's inner coat pocket. Joe had already put out three champagne coupes, into which the Finn now poured a liquid of such pure gold that for a brief moment it seemed as though those three shallow glasses illumined the whole of the Elysium. They fizzed slightly as the Finn handed one each to Lorelei, Mickey, and Joe. "*Kippis*," he said. "Cheers."

They drank. Then they all stared wildly into their glasses. Then they all stared wildly at one another, and realized the same strange thing was happening to each of them. Joe held his glass up to the light, frowning as he spun the delicate stem in his fingers. Lorelei closed her eyes and licked her lips. Mickey downed the rest of his

glass in one gulp and stood there, swaying slightly to a rhythm only he could hear.

"What is it?" Joe asked.

"Champagne," said the Finn, "of a sort. It is made from the *lakka*, a berry from my country. They grow very well in the north of this country as well."

"Cloudberrries," murmured Lorelei.

The Finn nodded, and for the first time he smiled. "The recipe was invented by my grandfather, and as far as I know no one has been able to duplicate it."

"It tastes like music," Mickey said softly.

"It can do that," conceded the Finn.

Joe shot Mickey a glare, then turned to face Parvinen. "How much of it would you be willing to sell?"

"That all depends on the price. For twenty dollars a bottle, I would sell you as much as I could make."

"Twenty dollars!" cried Joe. "No deal."

The Finn shrugged. "That is your decision." He returned his hat to his head and moved toward the door.

"Joe," Mickey urged, "don't be a fool."

Joe finished his glass and called after the Finn, "I couldn't possible go higher than ten." Mickey stared. Joe had never offered a bootlegger more than eight dollars per, and that was for a top-shelf Canadian product with the label still on.

"*Pyh*," said the Finn, though he was no longer walking. "For that, I could let you have five bottles a week, maybe. Fifteen dollars."

"Thirteen," said Joe.

"*Sovittu*," said the Finn. "We are agreed." He turned and walked back to the bar and a handshake made it official.

