

Interview With a Pimp

by Robert Lamb

(excerpted from Atlanta Blues)

Chapter Twelve

The Midtown Manor Hotel, located in the heart of The Strip, had given up all pretense of being a real hotel. The carpeting had been ripped up, rolled up, stacked here and there against the walls, and a cigarette machine was the lobby's only piece of decor, its only furnishing. People in need of a place to sit sat out front on the steps or simply went on needing a place to sit. No doorman guarded the entrance, no bellboys hustled about, no fleet of registration clerks stood uniformed and ready to be of service. But the Midtown Manor was open for business and obviously getting some. People milled around out front, and came and went in the lobby, and I could tell from the noise of the elevators that they stayed busy.

"Oh, this p-p-place m-m-makes m-money," the night clerk said, smiling. Tall and black, he sat in a small cubicle about halfway down the narrow lobby, near the elevators. He stuttered worse than anybody I'd ever heard. "You'll have t-to excuse m-m-me," he said. "I have this s-s-silly s-s-s-speech im-im-pediment. It'll g-get b-better once I g-g-get u-u-used to you."

A buzzer sounded and a red light lit up on the switchboard. He put down the book he had been reading, plugged into the switchboard and said, "D-d-desk."

I stood at the front counter and could easily see the title of the book, a paperback. It was Bertrand Russell's *Wisdom of the West*. When he pulled the plug on the switchboard, I said with raised eyebrows, "A hotel desk clerk who reads Bertrand Russell?"

He smiled sheepishly. "You'll r-read anything on a j-j-job like this."

I introduced myself, told him why I was there, and we chatted a few more minutes. His name was Jerry Chatham, he was 30, lived there in the hotel with his wife and little girl -- and had a college degree in mathematics.

"Pretty far from your field, aren't you?" I didn't want to throw off on his line of work, but surely a man with a college degree could do better than he appeared to be doing.

He tried to act matter-of-fact, but sadness lurked behind his eyes. "M-my d-d-dream was to be a t-t-teacher. But have you ever s-seen a s-s-s-stuttering t-teacher?"

I hadn't. Had never even thought of it. I shook my head. "I'm sorry."

He raised his hands, palms up. "I th-thought I c-could l-l-lick this th-thing, b-but I haven't. N-n-no-b-body else w-wants a s-stuttering m-m-mathematician either. I g-got this job 'c-cause I work cheap." He waved a hand to indicate his surroundings.

It seemed a good time to change the subject, so I showed him the pictures of Connie and Sims. "My main interest is the girl. The guy seems to like boys."

Jerry nodded and studied the pictures, and then shook his head. "No. N-never s-seen either one." He added, however, that if Connie were anywhere on The Strip he might be able to help me. "Th-this hotel is f-full of p-prostitutes and p-pimps, and if s-she's out th-there, there's a g-good ch-chance they've s-seen her."

Just then, a short brunette wearing a skirt and blouse easily a size too small for her passed the desk on her way out. Jerry hailed her and she sauntered over to the desk.

"Ever s-seen this g-girl, S-Sherri? He showed her Connie's picture.

The girl, about 20, looked at the picture and then at me, and finally at Jerry. "No. Kinda young, ain't she? Big boobs, though." She look up at me, giving me the once-over. "You looking for young stuff?"

"No," I said. I almost added a ridiculous "thank-you," but caught myself before saying it.

"He's n-n-not a j-john," Jerry said.

She looked me up and down again. "Too bad," she said. Then she glanced again at the photo. "Nice tits, though. Like to have a pair like that, myself." She strolled on out the door.

Jerry turned to me. "S-stay here awhile and I'll ask a f-few m-more. B-But your b-best b-bet would be a p-pimp."

"Can you direct me to one?"

He laughed. "They ain't exactly l-listed in the y-y-yellow p-pages, you know. Besides, n-no pimp gonna g-give you the t-time of day."

"Surely there are some around here, some you know."

He nodded.

"Would you mind asking for me?" I heard the lobby doors swing open and turned to see a short, wiry young man coming toward us. He sported a Little-Richard hairdo and wore clothes that looked flashy but cheap. "How about him? He a pimp?"

Jerry watched the man as he stopped at the cigarette machine, just out of hearing range. "He's n-no pimp; he's a shrimp." He laughed

and explained. "A s-shrimp is someb-body tryin' to be a p-pimp." He turned thoughtful for a moment, and when the young man got his cigarettes and left, he said, "L-look, p-pimps wouldn't give m-me the time of day, either. B-but there're a couple here in th-the hotel who owe me a f-favor. Hold on."

He went to the switchboard and rang one of the rooms. I moved away to a discreet distance so he could make his pitch in private, and soon he came back to the desk front. "He d-didn't like it much, b-but he said to s-send you up. Room 412."

"Name?"

"J-just call him Ray -- and d-don't ask for a last n-name to g-go with it."

I thanked him and went to the elevators.

When I knocked on the door of 412, a surly male voice came from within. "It's open."

I entered the room and saw a tall, thin man standing at the window, looking out through blinds onto Peachtree Street. "Jerry sent me," I said.

He went on peering out the window for a minute and then turned to face me. "You a cop?"

"Reporter."

"Got any I.D.?"

I took out my billfold and showed him my Phoenix identification card. My picture was on it. He looked at it carefully and handed it back. "I don't like this," he said, obviously meaning the situation.

"I'm just trying to help somebody."

"Ain't nobody ever help me." He eased down into a chair and lifted his feet onto the bed, crossing them at the ankles. "What she look like, this chick you lookin' for?"

I took out Connie's picture and handed it to him.

He looked at it. "They a reward out for her?"

"No. Her parents are just plain, everyday people."

"I ain't seen her." He leaned over to peer through the blinds again. "How long she been gone?"

"Eleven days."

Still looking out the window, he said, "What make you think she 'round here?"

"Just a guess. We've looked everywhere else. Figured we'd try here."

He looked quickly around at me. "Who's we?"

To cover my slip-up, I said, "Other reporters."

He looked at the picture of Connie again, still in his hand, and then gave me a scrutinizing look. "This chick must be somethin' special."

"Only to her mother and father. And to me, I guess."

"What she to you?"

I squirmed a bit. "I lost somebody special one time. I know how it feels."

He looked at me for a long moment, his face flat and expressionless, and then looked at the picture of Connie again. Then he called out, "Maxine, get in here!"

Through a door I hadn't noticed, a door into another room, a short, very curvaceous, peroxidized blonde entered. "You call, Ray?"

He snorted. "If I didn't call, what you doin' here?"

She dropped her gaze to the floor and said nothing.

"Come over here," he said.

She walked by me and around the foot of the bed. He handed her the picture of Connie and pointed at me. "This man's lookin' for that chick. Tell him did you ever see her before."

Maxine looked at the picture and then at Ray. He said pointedly, "Tell him the truth."

She glanced at the picture again and then at me. "I've never seen her before."

"Give him back the picture and get out," Ray said.

She handed it to me as she started back to the other room. When she got near the door, the pimp snapped, "That ain't out. Out is on the street. And this time you better put yo' money-maker to makin' money. I catch you sittin' on it again, you be one sorry little mama."

Looking flustered, she motioned toward the door. "I need my lipstick."

"You need what I say you need, and you need to get yo' ass out on the street."

She went.

When she closed the door, the pimp yawned and stretched. "She good, but lazy," he said.

I folded Connie's picture, put it away and started to leave, but I had a question I couldn't resist asking. It might help me find Connie. "What makes a girl become a prostitute?"

He looked at me as if he could not believe I didn't know. "Money," he said. "M-o-n-e-y."

"No offense, but Maxine didn't seem all that eager to get out there and make money."

He eased his feet off the bed and began to slip on shoes. "Maxine think small. She done made \$300 today and she think that enough. He stood up and smoothed his pants. "When she was waitressin', she done good to turn \$150 a week. Maxine got a million-dollar ass and a five-dollar brain. She need me to tell her what's enough."

He turned to look out the window again. I thanked him and left.

Jerry was away from the desk when I got back to the lobby. When he hadn't returned in a couple of minutes, I scribbled a note saying, "No luck, but thanks," and left it where he'd see it.

