

'Knuckles' and The 'Louse'

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“I told you that story so you'd realized that in the valley of honesty a dark underworld exists and to warn you about the risks of following that path.

“Russell could have avoided jail, and all its attendant bitterness, and made his way as an honest gambler. But I suspect that you're thinking about Russell's state of mind. If you want to understand Russell's *mind*, you shouldn't look to his gambling. Russell's problem was not one of gambling. Russell loved women, and it was on account of his penchant for *women* that he got his head caught in a vice more than once.”

“What do you mean by 'he got his head caught in a vice'?” asked the Kid, intrigued. “Is that some sort of metaphor?”

“No,” said the Old-Timer. “It means he got his head stuck in a vice.”

“More than once?”

“More than once.”

“Well, I'd like to hear that story,” said the Kid.

“Okay, then,” the Old-Timer began. “I have to tell you the secret of people like Russell. They are looking for adventure when they gamble as much or more than they are looking to build a bankroll. They enjoy the ride, catching the wave, and the larger the swing in fortune the happier those people are. People like Russell are never satisfied. They don't know how to close their minds off from lusting after the next adventure.

Poker Tales

“As a result, I never saw anyone tear through money like Russell tore through money. The more money he had, the bigger the swings he underwent. If he had \$100 in his pocket, he could lose \$75 or make \$150. And when he had a \$100,000 bankroll he could lose it all, or be up \$250,000 at the end of the night. He would invite me to play in cash games, and sometimes I would. But more often I would sit on the side and observe. I was astonished at what I saw. But Russell was a good gambler, and in Las Vegas this means that on average you win more than you lose.

“With his newfound wealth, he started to enjoy the fruits of his labor. He had women; he had a great big house; and he was invited to all the parties. It was at one of these parties that he met Nina Powerfrau. Nina was the single most fascinating woman Russell had ever met. She had come to Las Vegas as young woman and worked as a waitress, I think. She was far too beautiful and far too clever remains in such a job, and soon she was getting invited to parties where she discovered that wealthy men would pay her for companionship.”

“What does that mean?” asked the Kid.

“She was a whore, Kid. A high class whore, mind you, but a whore nevertheless.

“So at first she saw Russell as nothing more than another john, but Russell was smitten. So they started ‘dating’—you know what I mean by ‘dating,’ don’t you, Kid?” The Kid nodded yes. “But after a while, she found in Russell a sort of kindred spirit. He was riding the waves, just as she was. He had money and friends; he was a good companion (he never beat her); and he was in love with her. So she gave up whoring, married Russell, and settled in to a nice suburban life. She had made it.

“The problem with Nina was that she was at heart an adventurer, just like her new husband. And adventurers can never be satisfied with what they have if there is something over the horizon that they don’t have.

“In my opinion, Kid, this has nothing to do with desire for any external objects. It has to do with the fact that there’s something missing in their hearts. Philosophers tell us that human beings can never settle

'Knuckles' and 'The Louse'

down and be satisfied with what they have until they reconcile themselves with themselves. But cities like Las Vegas are filled with people who come looking elsewhere for what they could never find at home. It's a human thing.

"Most people in the world learned to live their lives within the limits of the human experience, but some people leave their nice suburban houses and come to Las Vegas, believing that the city will fill up the holes that could not be filled up at home. And when they don't find it here, they encounter their own limitations, their own flaws, in full force. This is what happened to Nina. Despite her desire to settle into a nice suburban life, which looked so nice from the outside, she could never settle down into a steady life with no ups-and-downs.

"This meant that she went from appreciating Russell, who had a sense of adventure that rivaled her own, to frustration with him for not being able to cure her of her itch for adventure. She wanted him around more, but she could not cure him of the thing she had married him for: his sense of adventure, which drew him out of the house to the poker tables for hours on end.

"As she grew more frustrated, she shopped more and more. This put a lot of stress on Russell to make more money, which drew him to larger games and kept him away from her late into the night and early into the morning hours. And of course sometimes he won and sometimes he lost. But now when he lost, his wife, who thought she wanted to live a life of leisure, started admonishing him.

"How could you lose your bankroll?" she would ask him. "Why were you out so late?" Things like that.

"And then there was the jail thing. She was actually glad when he went to jail the first time, for it gave her some breathing room. But the second time Russell went away, Nina was mad, for Russell had been losing at the point that he had gotten caught. He put her on a rigid budget while he was away. And now Nina, who had been a waitress working for tips three years ago, found that Russell was too poor to support her in the means to which she had become accustomed.

"It was at this point that Nina had met an up-and-coming star in Las Vegas: Charlie 'Knuckles' Palmetto. Though not a gangster himself,

Poker Tales

'Knuckles' was involved with the mob back in Chicago. He'd been sent here as an 'honest' man to overlook the 'skim,' the profits that the mob took off the top of everything the casinos made. But 'Knuckles' was a gifted manager, and he introduced several of the innovations that made Las Vegas what it is today."

"Nina met 'Knuckles' at a party. It was love at first sight, Vegas style. And by that I mean that he was immediately taken by her looks, while Nina was taken by 'Knuckles's' bankroll. As far as all the rest, I'm not sure they were perfectly matched any more than Russell was matched with Nina.

"The thing about 'Knuckles,' though, was that he had gotten wealthy enough to store money away for a rainy day. This meant that he was not on the cycle of traveling between the high highs and low lows that Russell was. And this fit in with the more conservative image that Nina was trying to project at the time.

"Russell got out of prison expecting his wife to welcome him, but Nina had moved beyond him during his second stay in prison. And she began to lecture him even more about keeping his bankroll more even and not allowing himself to get carried away with the highs and lows. 'Be more like "Knuckles,"' she would say.

"'Rich?' he would ask.

"'Stable,' she would respond.

"This infuriated Russell, who did not really understand his wife's motivations. Hadn't she had married him on the basis that he was a gambler who experienced highs and lows that others were too afraid to experience for themselves? She could not help but agree, but rational answers are no match for irrational and changing circumstances. Reason with its quest for order simply hid the underlying chaos of her actions from her.

"And, of course, Russell did not change his ways, but continued in the actions that had got him his beautiful wife. And this involved periodically going to jail. And after the third time he went to jail, Nina had had enough. She left Russell, filed for divorce, and married 'Knuckles.'

'Knuckles' and 'The Louse'

“The thing is, Kid, that situations change, even love changes, and we have to adapt our expectations to changing situations. If we do not, we are stuck living in the past. But as comfortable as it is to live in the past, we need to adapt our lives to present circumstances or the future will pass us by.

“Now, the future is always uncertain. Our expectations can always be subverted by factors that we have no control over. The best we can hope for is some sort of statistical probability. But Russell was too impulsive to look towards the future in anything but cards. And this was his downfall in marriage.

“And with the downfall of his marriage, Russell started losing his focus even at cards. He had always lost, but now that he started to lose, he could not win. He was seduced by the power of his other, and I've always thought his greater, desire to possess the love of his life.

“There's a lesson here, Kid. It is that if you want to win at cards, you might not have luck in love. Gambling makes for an unhappy life.

“And so he started writing her notes and poems expressing his love for her. But, unfortunately, she was happy to have escaped his up and down the lifestyle for a more stable upper class existence with 'Knuckles,' and she rebuffed every effort to win her back. It was sad to see.

“Unfortunately, Nina could be no happier with 'Knuckles' than she was with Russell, because she had not made peace with herself. And this was why, after only a year she started to have thoughts about the only thing that 'Knuckles' had forbidden her: Gino 'the Louse' Monstrinni.

“'The Louse' had been sent to Las Vegas by the mob a couple years before on account of one of the many insoluble problems that thieves have always had in running their Vegas operations. They had found an honest man in 'Knuckles' Palmetto. As a result, he started to make more money for his casinos than others who were still living in an old-fashioned era in which problems were solved without recourse to law but in secret and dark back rooms.

“When others followed, 'Knuckles' more honest approach in the present, 'Knuckles' simply looked at the shortcomings of the present,

Poker Tales

fixed those, and found new ways to beat the competition in the future. In this way, 'Knuckles' managed to say one step ahead of his competition. And, because he had skills that no one else in Las Vegas had, the mob back home gave him more power to run more operations.

"The problem with this was that eventually 'Knuckles' got so powerful in Las Vegas that the mob couldn't control him. They were pleased with 'Knuckles' results, of course, but quite displeased with his insubordination. So they sent the dishonest 'Louse' to watch the honest watcher.

"The 'Louse' immediately gained a reputation as one of the baddest men ever to hit the strip. He was a reckless gambler and unbelievably violent. His favorite activity was to put his enemy's head in a vice and slowly squeeze until their eyes popped out. Unfortunately, it is not common to have eyes pop out of heads when heads are put into vices. Instead, his victims' heads were simply crushed and their brains spilled out onto the floor. But that was an acceptable result for 'the Louse,' as well. No gambler who wanted to keep his eyes in his head ever crossed him.

"Unfortunately, Russell was unbelievably stubborn, and rather than moving on, which is what you and I would've done, he threatened 'Knuckles' repeatedly. After one too many threats 'Knuckles' had 'the Louse' go around to Russell's house to 'take care' of Russell.

"Don't kill him,' said 'Knuckles.' 'Just rough him up enough that he stays away from my Nina.'

"The 'Louse' showed up at Russell's house and warned him to stay away from Nina. But Russell was a stubborn man, and he refused. 'You'll have to kill me first,' he said.

"That can be arranged,' said 'the Louse,' who has chosen his favorite vice from his collection to squeeze the brains out of this man, as a child would squeeze the guts out of a captured ant.

"Have you ever had your head squeezed in a vice by an angry mobster, Kid," the Old-Timer asked the Kid.

"God, no!" exclaimed the Kid.

"Well, let me tell you, it hurts. But Russell was so single-minded in

'Knuckles' and 'The Louse'

his obsession that he submitted to the torture, going so far as to beg 'the Louse' to kill him. But 'the Louse' had no intention of killing Russell.

"What's so special about her?' he asked.

"She is my wife,' Russell said.

"Was,' repeated 'the Louse' with a turn of the crank for emphasis.

"Is,' said Russell, who, despite being in excruciating pain, truly believed that the vows he'd taken at the Graceland Wedding Chapel were binding for all time. 'We were bound in marriage and what God has joined, no man can sunder.' That has always seemed to me to be a particularly odd moment for Russell to wax religious, but perhaps religion comes to people in moments of great trial.

"In any case, 'the Louse' merely turned the screws again and asked Russell to reconsider something so inconsequential as the tense of his declaration of love.

"Have you ever been married?' Russell asked 'the Louse.'

"Yeah, a couple times,' said 'the Louse.'

"Well then, you know that I can never renounce the one true love of my life,' and then he began to declare his love for Nina in terms that would make a poet weep. He told her he loved her for all the qualities that he beheld when he looked at her: of her eyes, which glinted like fire; of her arms, which rivaled Venus'; and of her bosom, which she would show only to him while she bathed and which was perfect. And all these qualities combined in her to make a package so full, so complete, that it defied description.

"Now 'the Louse' had met Nina several times, but he had never recognized anything special about her that would raise her above other women; but when Russell described her so, 'the Louse' started to wonder what was so special about her forbidden touch. And from the moment that Russell raised her up above all other women, she was raised above other women in 'the Louse's mind, though to be fair he was captured more by the thinness of her arm, the fullness of her bosom, and the beauty of her eyes and face, than by the end of love which Russell hoped to convey as he faced death with such mad willfulness.

Poker Tales

“It’s a funny thing about the criminal mind, Kid. Most people in the world learn to tame their desires. Not so the criminal. The more forbidden things are, the greater their draw. And once you point out to a criminal that they cannot have something, they want it even more. They do not have the check and balances on their lives that make life tolerable for the rest of us. Instead, they travel through life catering to their desires and, if they’re lucky, having their desires catered to them.

“At the end of his day’s work, ‘the Louse’ released Russell from the grips of his vice and sent him on his way. Russell, for his part, managed to tame his obsession with Nina. That is not to say he forgot his love for her, but the argument of the vice had put his obsession into perspective. Having tamed his obsession, he got his gambling back on track. He came over for weekly visits with the kids, supervised by ‘the Louse,’ of course.

“But Nina still had a hole in her heart that ‘Knuckles’s money did not erase. For money was merely a cipher in a symbolic system of exchange, but love was the desire to fix holes in ourselves through others that we do not have the capacity to fix by our own means.

“Being desperate for human companionship and being robbed of any opportunity to even meet other men, Nina took up with ‘the Louse,’ who Russell had so enticed with words spoken from his poetic soul. She professed her love for ‘the Louse’ as she had professed her love for ‘Knuckles’ and Russell before him. It was an inevitable matter of human nature winning out in its quest to close an open seam in a human heart.

“But even then, she could no more be satisfied with ‘the Louse’ as her companion than she could be satisfied with ‘Knuckles’ or Russell. And lacking the means of introspection, which thoughtful men use to organize their lives, she began to drink, which only made the matter worse.

“In the middle of this, Russell showed up at ‘Knuckles’ house and saw the bottles strewn about. Realizing that she must be unhappy with her present husband, he reminded her of how happy they had been when they had no money but were free. He offered himself to her as a remedy for her present unhappiness, but Nina refused his earnest but

'Knuckles' and 'The Louse'

misguided request.

“So Russell decided that if he couldn't have her he would apply pressures of his own. He started to bring around pills of all sorts, which at first he would slip her when 'the Louse' wasn't looking. She would take them indifferently to ease her unhappiness. But 'the Louse' wasn't immune to that sort of fun, and he, too, started to take the pills for the pure enjoyment that they brought. And this lasted until she was as much dependent on them as she was on the bottle. And unlike the bottle, which Nina could (and had) ordered 'the Louse' to buy, they both needed Russell to supply them with the drugs which both were addicted to.

“Then Russell played his ace in the hole. He refused to supply Nina with any more drugs until she slept with him. At first she refused on principle, but her principles lasted no more than an hour; for principles are no match for desires in unprincipled minds, especially desires that have gone unchecked for so long. So, telling herself she had no choice, she complied. She told 'the Louse' that she needed a bottle of bourbon before she would sleep with him again, and 'the Louse' ran out, leaving her alone to call Russell. They slept together; and Nina was happy, if not with Russell's body, with the relief from want that she came to associate with Russell's presence.

“Well, this went on for a few months before 'Knuckles' became suspicious. He asked 'the Louse' whether he had seen anything suspicious, to which 'the Louse' replied immediately and emphatically and a little too quickly no. But in his heart 'the Louse' knew he had been played, and when 'Knuckles' told him to give Russell's eyeballs another workout, he was glad to oblige him.

“‘Make him suffer long and hard,’ ‘Knuckles’ said, ‘and don't worry about keeping him alive at the end of his ordeal.’

“‘The Louse' dutifully captured Russell on the street and secured Russell's head in one of his vices for killing a person as slowly as possible. This one had a fine thread that allowed for twice as much control as an ordinary vice would give to a killer such as 'the Louse.’

“He squoze his head, and then he waited. And right on time, 'Knuckles' showed up and started ranting.

Poker Tales

“How could you do this to me?” ‘Knuckles’ asked the man who was splayed out on the table and reeling from the pain of the vice’s grip on his head.

“She was my wife before you stole her away from me,” said Russell.

“I didn’t steal nothing,” said ‘Knuckles. ‘She didn’t want youse no more. She wanted me. *Me!* Turn the screws, Gino!’

“The Louse’ started towards the table, but Russell just whispered his ha-ha’s.

“What are you laughing about, scumbag?” ‘Knuckles’ wanted to know.

“It was then that Russell played another ace he had hidden up his sleeve. ‘You wanna kill me? Go ahead. But let me tell you, your problems won’t end with me.’

“What you talking about?” asked ‘Knuckles.’

“I only slept with you wife once, but the man you’ve brought to kill me—the bodyguard you placed to watch her—he’s slept with her a hundred times!”

“His words instantly raised suspicion in ‘Knuckles’ mind, but he said only ‘I don’t believe you.’

“You don’t have to believe me. Look at him.”

“And ‘Knuckles’ did look at ‘the Louse’ and looking saw a hangdog look that he had never seen before on the face of his childhood friend, Gino ‘the Louse’ Monstrinni. And right then and there, he knew.

“The Louse’s expression had changed almost instantly to a look of hatred, and he raced to kill Russell before he could say anything else. But ‘Knuckles’ had a gun, and he pointed it at ‘the Louse.’

“This is where the story gets interesting. ‘Knuckles’ missed his first shot on account of his never having fired a gun before. Then he fired five more times, and missed all those shots, as well.

“Having ducked the bullets intended to kill him, ‘the Louse’ then went back and started turning the screws more out of rage than anything else, while ‘Knuckles’ reloaded.

“Russell told me he felt his eyes popping out a little, but more than

'Knuckles' and 'The Louse'

that he felt his head was about to burst.

“‘Knuckles’ fired again and missed again, but ‘the Louse’ had to take his hands off the vice in order to dodge ‘Knuckles’s’ bullet. But after, he was putting all his muscle to the screws once more.

“Russell told me later that this was the worst moment of the ordeal. He had thought ‘the Louse’ would run from ‘Knuckles’ gunfire. He had not counted on the ‘Louse’ continuing to turn the screws. Nor had he thought that ‘Knuckles’ could be so slow in reloading his pistol. For the first time he started to think that this wasn’t as perfect an idea as he had originally thought.

“‘Knuckles’ fired again, and this time he hit ‘the Louse’ in his calf. ‘The Louse’ was shocked for a moment, but a realization had dawned on him at the moment. He said, ‘Youse has never fired a pistol before, has ya? Well, I gotta tell ya, it ain’t as easy to kill a man as you think, huh?’

“This was apparently the product of ‘the Louse’s’ having watched a lot of movies, because the actual experience of his own life told a very different story. And with that he let go of the screws and lunged toward his old schoolyard friend.

“He never got there. ‘Knuckles’ pointed the gun squarely at ‘the Louse’s’ head and fired his last bullet.

“‘It ain’t that hard,’ ‘Knuckles’ is supposed to have said.

“After murdering his friend, he was determined to finish off his rival, but Russell had taken precautions. He had warned the Las Vegas Police Department that there was going to be a murder and advised them to follow him for a few days and put a wire on him. They arrived at just the right moment. They arrested ‘Knuckles’ for murder and released my friend Russell from the grip of the vice.

“And that was the end of that.”

“What happened to the survivors of the drama?” asked the Kid.

“‘Knuckles’ was sentenced to 15 years, but he got out in 8. The casinos banned him for life, so he retired, I think. Nina Powerfrau, who had a sad life before her three marriages, had her life turn to tragedy. She had no money of her own, and she died of a heroin overdose a few

Poker Tales

years later.”

“And what about your friend Russell?”

“Nothing really happened to Russell. He continued alternate between gambling and stints in jail until they banned him from entering a casino for the purposes of gambling for life. You know the rest. But the episode did give him a new nickname.”

“What was that?” asked the Kid.

“Popeye.”