



Goodbye, Dead Man!

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IT WAS ORLEY Mattup's killing of the old lab technician that really made us hate him.

Mattup was a guard at the reactor installation at Bayless, Kentucky, where my friend Danny Hern and I were part of the staff when the Outsiders took everything over. In what god-forsaken mountain hole they had found Mattup, and how they got him to sell out to them, I don't know. He was an authentic human, though. You can tell an Outsider.

Mattup and Danny and I were playing high-low-jack the night Uncle Pete was killed, sitting on the widewalk where Mattup had a view of the part of the station he was responsible for. High-low-jack is a back-country card game; Danny had learned it in northern Pennsylvania, where he came from, and Mattup loved the game, and they had taught it to me because the game is better three-handed. The evening sessions had been Danny's idea—I think he figured it might give him a line on Mattup.

On the night in question, Mattup was on a week's losing streak and was in a foul humor. He was superstitious, and he had called for a new deck twice that evening and walked around his seat four different times. His bidding was getting wilder.

"You'd better cool down," Danny told him. "Thing to do is ride out the bad luck, not fight it."

Orley picked his nose and looked at his cards, "Bid four," he growled.

Four is the highest possible bid. Tim played his cards well and he had good ones. He had sewed up three of his points when we heard somebody moving around down on the reactor floor. It was old Uncle Pete Barker, one of the technicians.

"What you want down there?" bawled Mattup.

"Just left my cap by the control room," said Uncle Pete, "and thought I'd go get it."

"You keep the hell away from there," grunted Mattup.

Uncle Pete stopped and stood gazing up at us. We went on playing. It was the last card of the hand, and would either win the game for Mattup or lose it for him. Orley slapped his card down; it was a crucial card, the jack. Danny took it with a queen and Mattup had lost the game.

I felt like clearing out. Mattup's face was purple and his eyes looked like wolves' eyes. He glared at Danny, making a noise in his throat, and then I saw his gaze leave Danny and go to something down by the reactor.

It was Uncle Pete, shuffling along toward the control room.

Mattup didn't say a word. He stood up and unholstered the thing the Outsiders had given him and pointed it at Uncle Pete. There was a ringing in our ears and Uncle Pete began to twist. Something inside him twisted him, twisting inside his arms, his legs, head, trunk, even his fingers. It was only for a few seconds. Then the ringing stopped, and Uncle Pete sunk to the ground, and there was the silence and the smell.

Mattup made us leave the body there until we had played two more hands. Danny won one; he was a man with good nerves. When we were back in our room he said, "That did it—I'm going to get that guy."

"I hate his big thick guts," I said, buttoning my pajama shirt, "but how are you going to get him?"

"I'll get him," said Danny. "Meanwhile, we'll keep playing cards."

Things went on almost normally at the Bayless reactor. It was a privately-owned pool-type reactor, and we were sent samples of all sorts of material for irradiation from all over the country. Danny was one of the irradiation men; I generally handled controlling. The Outsiders had filled the place with telescreens and guards, and all mail was opened, but there was no real interference with the work. I began to worry a little about Danny. Almost every afternoon he spent an hour alone in our room, with the door closed.

Mattup kept getting worse; an animal with power. He used to go hunting with the damnable Outsider weapon, although the meat killed with it wasn't fit to eat, and he used it on birds until there wasn't one left anywhere near the plant. He never killed a bluebird, though. He said it was bad luck. Sometimes he drank moonshine corn liquor, usually alone, because the Outsiders wouldn't touch it, but sometimes he made some of us drink with him, watching sharply to see we didn't poison him and craftily picking his nose. When he was drunk he was abusive.

ONE NIGHT we were in our room, dead for sleep after a long game, and Danny said, "Let me show you something."

He shuffled the cards, I cut, and he dealt me an ace, king, queen, jack, ten and deuce of spades. He shuffled again and dealt me the same in hearts.

"Watch as closely as you can," he grinned. "See if you can catch me."

I couldn't.

"I've been practicing," he said. "I'm going to get Mattup."

"What good will it do to beat him in cards? You'll only make him sore." I was relieved to learn what Danny had been doing, alone in our room, but this card-sharp angle didn't make much sense to me.

"Who says I'm going to beat him at cards?" smiled Danny. "By the way, did you hear the rumor? They're going to break up the staff, Outsider policy, send us to Oak Ridge, Argonne, Shippingport, send new people down here."

"That doesn't leave you much time," I said.

"Time enough," said Danny.

The next night Mattup began a fantastic streak of luck. It seemed he couldn't lose, and he was as unpleasant a winner as he was a loser.

"You boys don't know what card-playin' is," he'd gloat. "Think you're pretty smarty with all that science stuff but you can't win a plain old card game. You know why you can't beat me, boys?"

"Because you're too smart, I guess," said Danny.

"Well, yeah, and somethin' else. I dipped my hands in spunk water, up on the mountain where you can never find it, and besides that I spit on ever' card in this deck and wiped it off. Couldn't lose now to save my life."

"Maybe you're right," said Danny, and went on dealing.

In a few days the rumor of moving was confirmed; I was being sent to Oak Ridge, Danny to Argonne. Mattup kept winning, and "suggested" that we raise the stakes. By the day that we were to leave we owed him every cent we had.

I paid up soberly; I wouldn't give Mattup any satisfaction by complaining. It looked as though Danny wasn't going to "get" Mattup after all. But Danny surprised me.

"Look, buster," he wheedled. "If I pay you seventy-five bucks I won't have a cent left. How about me paying half now and the rest later?"

"No good," said Mattup. "You got it—pay me. If you can't pay cash gimme your watch. I know you got one."

"Look, buster—"

"Quit callin' me buster."

"What am I going to live on until I get paid again?"

"What do I care?"

It went on like that until the busses for the airport were nearly ready to leave and both men seemed angry enough to kill each other.

"Let's go," I begged Danny. "Pay him and leave."

"All right then!" Danny snapped, and pulled out his wallet. He counted out all his bills into Mattup's hand.

"You're a buck short," said Mattup.

"Why not forget the buck?" said Danny. "You can spare it."

"You're a buck short," repeated Mattup, scowling.

Danny dashed his wallet to the ground. "You're even taking my change!" He got his jacket from the back of a chair—it was a hot day—and emptied change from the side pocket.

There were two quarters and a half dollar, and he paid them over. "I have eleven cents left," he said. "Hell, take that too. I don't give a damn."

Mattup grinned. "Sure I'll take it—if you weren't lying when you said I could have it."

"It'll break me," said Danny.

"I know it," said Mattup. "Gonna break your promise?"

The bus driver was honking. "The hell with you," Danny said to Mattup, and gave him a dime and a penny. He looked Mattup in the eye with a strange expression. "Now, I gave you that and you didn't win it. You took it of your own free will. I offered it to you and you took it. Right?"

"Right," said Mattup. "Sucker."

We scrambled on the bus and as it pulled away Danny yelled "Hey, Buster, look!" Mattup looked, and Danny stuck his right arm out the window, pointing at Mattup with his right forefinger and his little finger stuck out straight and parallel, the thumb tucked under. A strange, disturbed look came over Orley. He turned his back as the bus roared out of the drive.

At the airport Danny popped into a phone-booth and got Orley on the line—nobody seemed to care, either Outsiders or guards—and he let me listen.

"Spent your money yet, dead man?" purred Danny.

"Whacha mean, dead man?" gruffed Orley's voice. "You crazy or something?"

"You know that eleven cents extra you took?" gloated Danny. "It's gonna kill you, Buster, for killing Uncle Pete, and for everything else you've done. I know. I've been talking nights to Uncle Pete. You're a dead duck, Orley Mattup! Dead!"

"That's—I don't believe it, it's baloney! I'm going to spend that eleven cents and get rid of it."

"You do exactly that, Buster. I locked the curse on it, and I made the sign on you, and you have to keep that eleven cents the rest of your life. If you spend it—or if you lose it, and you will lose it—that's the end of you."

"I'll come out there and pound the hell out of you!" yelled Mattup.

"Too late, Buster, our planes are leaving. Goodbye, dead man!"

And we had to run for our planes. Danny's pitch sounded pretty weak to me, even though Orley was superstitious, but I didn't get to tell Danny that until nearly five years later.

"I THINK I got him," said Danny. "You don't know the whole thing."

A hotel clerk had been listening. "You mean Orley Mattup, the guard? He got sick, and said he had a hex on him, and took off one day and a lot later they found him up on the mountain. He was dead."

"Any money on him?" asked Danny.

"Jest some change. They buried it with him; they heard the hex was locked onto that money."

"Congratulations," I told Danny. "I didn't think it'd work. You scared him to death."

"Not quite," said Danny. "I scared him into hanging onto the money. That money would have killed anybody that carried it much longer than the few minutes I handled it. I'd been keeping the stuff in the reactor beam tubes. It was radioactive as hell."

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