

# PYRAMID<sup>®</sup>



Issue 3/42 April '12

## NOIR

### THE ZEPHYR CLUB

by Matt Riggsby

THE GAMEABLE BOUNCER

by Jason Brick

HUMAN, FLAWED

by Michele Armellini

THE FEMME FATALE

by Cal Godot

THE HOUSE OF THE SUN

by J. Edward Tremlett

THE GATHERING WILL

by Steven Marsh

# STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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## Article Colors

Each article is color-coded to help you find your favorite sections.

- Pale Blue:* In This Issue
- Brown:* In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)
- Dark Blue:* GURPS Features
- Purple:* Systemless Features

**COVER ART**  
Steve Gardner

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Greg Hyland  
Matt Riggsby

Enter the gritty, gray world of noir . . .

# IN THIS ISSUE

Are those prison bars across your eyes? No – it’s the light through the vertical blinds coming into the office of *Pyramid*. This time we’re turning our shadow-obscured gaze to the gritty, gray world of noir.

For good times, wholesome entertainment, and the occasional dark secret, visit *The Zephyr Club*. Complete with labeled and unlabeled maps, this location is presented by Matt Riggsby, co-author of *GURPS Low-Tech*. Learn about a hot spot to trot and its inhabitants (with notable *GURPS* details).

Every nightclub needs a tough guy at the door, but any old strong-arm won’t do. For quality security, look no further than *The Gameable Bouncer*. Along with a discussion of job expectations and challenges (including how the job has evolved from the early 20th century to the 21st), this article includes three *GURPS* templates and two new optional *GURPS Martial Arts* techniques.

The truly good noir movies and novels have interesting supporting casts. Your campaigns should be no different! Michele Armellini (author of *GURPS WWII: Grim Legions*) provides backgrounds and *GURPS* stats for eight iconic secondary characters.

The typical noir protagonist is a loner, with a plucky secretary or assistant at best. However, RPGs thrive on groups. *The Gathering Will* is here to help. This systemless campaign hook should be good for at least two years of adventures . . . if everyone can stand not to kill each other that long!

San Francisco in the early 1930s was famed as a city of vices. *The House of the Sun* presents a fully fleshed early-noir den of iniquity, intrigue, and terrible danger that might have been established in Fog City. Explore this locale and its secrets in the game system of your choice; it’ll be the experience of a lifetime!

Where would the hard-boiled detective be without *The Femme Fatale* and her schemes? Unearth the characteristics most common to the plot’s most dangerous lady and the *GURPS* traits associated with them, plus learn tips for using the archetype as a PC or misleading the protagonists about who the *real* femme fatale is.

This month’s *Random Thought Table* delves into adding discontent by way of *more* choices. *Odds and Ends* provides a secret stash or two, while *Murphy’s Rules* reveals how to be a good cop *and* bad cop.

Whether you’re donning a fedora in a full-fledged noir campaign or looking to add some gray to your other genre’s blue skies, this issue of *Pyramid* has got your back. Don’t say you weren’t warned . . .

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# FROM THE EDITOR

## NOIR! WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

In a lot of ways, I feel that “noir” is a flavor that can apply to many different campaigns. It’s versatile like “horror” in that regard. Thus, we have noir-flavored superheroes in the form of Peter David’s *X-Factor* and Brian Michael Bendis’ and Michael Avon Oeming’s *Powers*, and sci-fi noir such as *Blade Runner* and *Inception*.

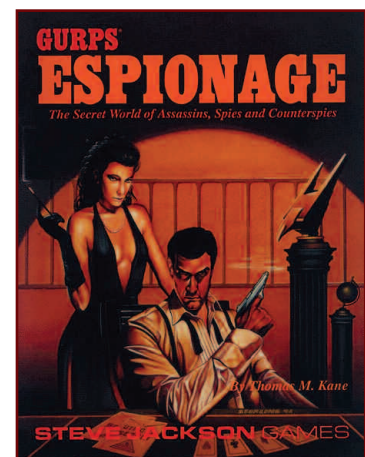
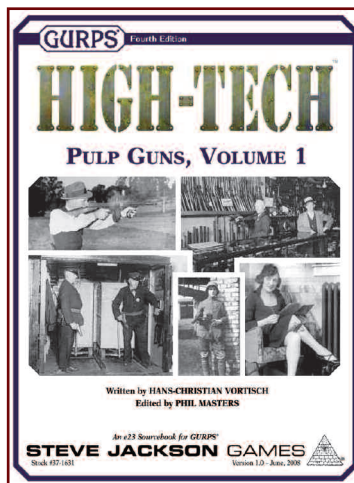
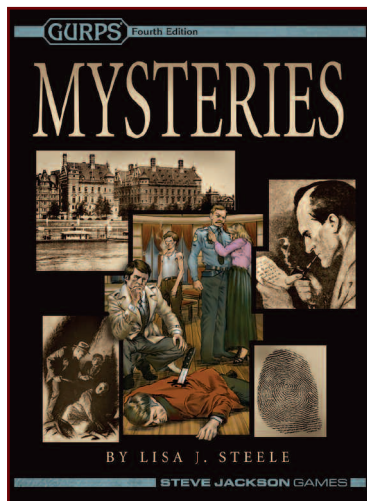
However, this issue looks at a relatively “pure” form of noir (with the exception of the transdimensional pub briefly detailed on p. 16 . . . it must’ve snuck past the security). We figure it’s easier to add noir to other campaigns that might benefit from it than it is to scrub strange elements. After all, any campaign from the past 100 years or so can use *GURPS* stats for bouncers (pp. 15-16); *GURPS* supporting-cast members that fit a noir sensibility (pp. 17-24) can turn up anywhere; gals who use their wiles (pp. 34-35) can cause mischief at any time; and odd situations that thrust random souls together (pp. 25-26) can be useful in most games.

In addition, similarly to horror, comedy, and action, “noir” as an idea is something that can be included in a campaign for a brief period, only to have it retreat to the shadows when the adventure is over. Even the most clear-cut black-and-white campaign might benefit from the shades of gray that a gritty adventure provides. (Frank Miller’s *Batman: Year One* started just a few months after one of the most over-the-top anniversary issues of *Batman* ever.)

So don your trench coat, question that “innocent” damsel once more, and venture into the night. If you play your cards right, you might just make it to see the morning.

## WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

Don’t let our sassy secretary get wind of it, but we love to get your feedback! So, feel free to send letters and comments to [pyramid@sjgames.com](mailto:pyramid@sjgames.com), or post online on our forums at [forums.sjgames.com](http://forums.sjgames.com). We always like to know what we’re done right, where we’ve gone wrong, and what we ought to do in the future. And if these articles have struck you with an idea for a future *Pyramid*, check out our Writer’s Guidelines at [sjgames.com/pyramid/writing.html](http://sjgames.com/pyramid/writing.html) for more information!



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# THE ZEPHYR CLUB

BY MATT RIGGSBY

What are you going to do with your best guy or gal on a night off? Stay home and listen to the radio? Of course not! You're going to get dressed up and head out on the town. The Zephyr Club offers a full bar, a full kitchen, and the exciting, romantic sounds of Emil Castle and his orchestra. It's a great place to go before or after a picture show, or for a full evening on its own. Whether your pleasure is dinner, dancing, drinks, or a dark corner, the Zephyr has what you need.

This article describes a nightclub suitable for a broad range of cliffhanger, detective, and other pulp, hard-boiled, or noir-inspired campaigns. In addition to the physical setting, there are a number of NPCs associated with the club. Each has relevant stats and a background that can serve merely as color or a springboard for adventure.

*Donovan Caine nodded at me  
a final time. Then the detective turned  
on his heel and walked out the door,  
leaving my gin joint and heart  
a little emptier and colder than  
they had been before.*

– Jennifer Estep, *Web of Lies*

## THE CLUB

The Zephyr Club is one of a number of similar bars, restaurants, and nightclubs in the downtown of a large city. Its layout is unremarkable for an establishment of its type.

### 1. ENTRANCE

The entrance from the street is a set of glass double doors under an awning that stretches across the sidewalk almost to the curb. The glass is frosted and mostly opaque, with the name of the club and a set of stylized wavy lines symbolizing the wind; the motif is repeated throughout the club's decor. A small paper sign indicates the club's hours. Dutch (p. 7), the doorman, opens doors for people arriving, summons taxis for those leaving, and filters out the most obvious riffraff.

### 2. VESTIBULE

A small entry room is immediately inside the front door. To the left is the hat and coat check, with Rita (p. 7) behind the counter and many clothing racks behind her. The door to the hatcheck room is locked, though it's a largely symbolic barrier since there's no shutter to close off the counter. A pair of phone booths is straight ahead, with curtains for a modicum of privacy, though they don't stop any sound. Each is also equipped with a phone book. The staff is sometimes indifferent about

keeping them up to date, and some patrons have torn out pages containing phone numbers or addresses they've been looking for. Another set of double doors to the right leads to the main room.

### 3. MAÎTRE D'S STATION

Mr. Bremmer (p. 7) has a small lectern-like desk with the reservation book and the house phone. Bremmer performs an additional level of filtering on undesirable guests and passes most of the remainder on to a waiter or waitress from here. He will see to particularly important ones personally. There's also a couch in the corner where early arrivals can await the rest of their party if they don't want to go to the bar for a head start on drinks.

### 4. BAR

A polished wood bar runs about half of the length of the main room. The wall behind is covered with mirrors, which are largely blocked by shelves full of bottles. Most of the drinks are garden-variety beers and distilled liquors, but there's a supply of champagne, a few wines, and a couple of high-end brandies and whiskeys for connoisseurs.

The ends of the bar near the walls are hinged and flip up so that staff can come in and out from behind it. There's also a locked cash box at either end; the bar serves as the main till, where waiters bring payment and get change. Just in case, there are several random bludgeons (baseball bats and lead pipes) under the bar at intervals so that a bartender never has to go more than a step or two grab a weapon. If the staff feel that there's a particular threat of robbery (during riots, the Great Depression, or just downturns in the character of the neighborhood), there's also a sawed-off shotgun; the 10G double shotgun on p. B275 will do, but see *The Sawed-Off Shotgun* in **GURPS High-Tech** (p. 106).

## 5. MAIN FLOOR

About half of the club's main room is occupied by small tables. They're arguably a bit too small and too closely set for a good restaurant, but that's not what the Zephyr Club aspires to be. However, they're good enough for the light fare the menu leans toward. They're perfect for resting briefly with drinks between dances and for intimate conversations.

The far end from the entrance contains a well-polished parquet dance floor, used by patrons or, depending on the show, professional performers.

## 6. STAGE

The stage is elevated three feet off the main floor. There's a low rim on which lights can be mounted, but it's no more than a few inches high and doesn't constitute a real barrier. The space under the stage is empty save for support beams, electrical wiring, and dust. Maintenance people can remove panels on the front of the stage and crawl under it; there's also a trap door at center stage at the very back.

## 7. BACKSTAGE

The crowded backstage has some room for performers to prepare, but little else. A pair of small dressing rooms is typically used by individual performers or double acts (the one on the far end is usually spoken for by Dolores, pp. 8-9). A pair of larger ones is used in common by less notable performers. The one closest to the stage door is generally occupied by chorus girls and female dancers, if a group of them happen to be performing that night. A set of doors opening on a cluttered back alley does double duty as a stage door and as a delivery entrance for the pantry and kitchen.

## 8. OFFICE

Mr. Camino's (p. 9) office is tucked in an inconspicuous corner of the club. The door isn't hidden, exactly, but it is covered with the same wavy-patterned wallpaper as the rest of the club. Thus, in the dim light, it can be hard to make it out. The door is also relatively heavy (treat as 1" wood; the rest are 1/2" wall-board or just plate glass; see p. B558). This is for soundproofing so the occupants can be heard over the sound of the band and the customers rather than physical protection. A small safe is located in the wall over the roll-top desk, just big enough to keep the receipts for two or three nights. It's rarely full anyway

since Camino believes in getting money in the bank quickly. He isn't a violent man, but he knows the business well enough to keep a large pistol in a desk drawer (use the .45 auto pistol on p. B278).

### *The Golden Age of Wireless*

One of the Zephyr Club's great attractions is a weekly live radio program. Friday nights from 9:15 to 10:00, a local radio station broadcasts Dolores and the band, with guest appearances by small-time comedians and touring solo performers. While people can usually get in without any trouble other nights, Fridays require reservations.

### *Menu*

The Zephyr Club serves simple American food. The menu contains mostly soups, sandwiches, and salads. For big spenders, basic steaks, chops, and some seafood are available, but they're not emphasized. The Los Angeles Public Library's collection of historic menus – [www.lapl.org/resources/en/menu\\_collection.html](http://www.lapl.org/resources/en/menu_collection.html) – can serve as inspiration and a pricing guide.

## 9. MEN'S ROOM

During business hours, Thales (p. 9), the janitor, is here helping customers straighten collars, adjust ties, and generally freshen up. There's also a large broom closet at one end of the room, full of soaps, mops, buckets, and other cleaning supplies.

## 10. POWDER ROOM

In addition to several toilet stalls and sinks, this room features a couch and plenty of mirror space. The staff haven't discovered it yet, but there's a .38 snub-nose revolver (see p. B278) taped to the inside of the tank lid of the farthest toilet from the door, part of a murder plot that never went off.

## 11. KITCHEN

When things really get going, this is the busiest room in the club. Waiters come in through the swinging door on the dance floor. They thread their way among line cooks on the left-hand aisle placing orders as they go. Then they grab dishes on their way out the other door. Most of the cooks are set up in the right-hand aisle, with sinks for dishwashing in the far corner. Even empty, it's packed with improvised weapons: knives, skewers, heavy ladles, pots (with and without hot contents), and so on, as well as less perishable groceries.

## 12. PANTRY

This room contains a mix of extra liquor, backup supplies for goods usually kept in the kitchen, extra linen for the tables, several iceboxes containing perishable goods, and odds and ends that don't go anywhere else. A little digging reveals such things as a toolbox, a few gallons of paint, some folding chairs and tables, and a couple of old framed paintings that are no longer needed on the walls.





## MAP OF THE ZEPHYR CLUB

For a larger, unlabeled version of this map, see pp. 10-11.

### Key

1. Entrance
2. Vestibule
3. Maître d's Station
4. Bar
5. Main Floor
6. Stage
7. Backstage
8. Office
9. Men's Room
10. Powder Room
11. Kitchen
12. Pantry

Scale: 1 hex = 1 yard

#99: *Why would brilliant, intelligent men wanna go to a place like that?*

Maxwell Smart: *Well, there are several reasons, 99. Men like that need a place to unwind. A change of atmosphere, a change of scene.*

#99: *But Max, there's nothing to do there except look at a lot of girls walking around half undressed.*

Maxwell Smart: *Say, that's the best reason yet.*

– **Get Smart**  
#2.27

# THE EMPLOYEES

There are a thousand stories in the naked city, and most of the people who work at the Zephyr Club have one to tell. This is a sampling of the Zephyr's more memorable staff. The "key stats" are particularly notable traits. Where not specified, assume that the employees have attributes in the 9 to 11 range and suitable job skills at 12.

## DUTCH, THE DOORMAN

For Dutch, the fight game was easier than high school. He was good, too; there was some talk that he could be groomed into a contender. Then he won that fight his manager was paid to lose, and the one time he ever thought quickly in his life, he got out of town before the local enforcers got to him. Dutch has settled comfortably into his life as a doorman, bouncer, and all-around big guy who lets other people think for him. He's got plenty of friends at a neighborhood gym where young boxers go to train (he keeps in shape by sparring). When Mr. Bremmer or Mr. Camino haven't told him to throw you out, he's one of the nicest guys you'd ever want to meet.

He does have a bit of a temper, though, and he still underestimates his own strength. Accidents could happen, and he could seriously hurt the wrong person at the wrong time. If that happens, he might have to go on the run again, or look for help from somebody smarter.

*Key Stats:* ST 15; HT 12; Boxing-15.

## RITA, THE HATCHECK GIRL

Rita is old enough to be the mother of most of the other women working at the club. She's spent most of her life working in places like it, though some much farther down the scale. She's seen it all, and done a lot of it, and she can take care of herself. While she's as cynical as one might expect, she's got a soft spot for some of her younger co-workers. She makes an effort to look out for them, though she won't get in their way if they're truly determined to do something stupid.

Rita has her life more or less as she likes it these days. But when she was younger, she moved with a rougher crowd. She kept company with one particular flashy hoodlum until things got too hot for her, and with great effort, she managed to pull herself away. Now, years later, he's the head of a local crime syndicate. If she were utterly desperate, she could see him and maybe even turn that meeting into a favor, but she doesn't like to think about what else she might have to do to get it.

*Key Stats:* Brawling-13; Streetwise-15.

## MR. BREMMER, THE MAÎTRE D'

Balding, limping from an old war wound, and with an immaculate waxed moustache, Mr. Bremmer (nobody ever thinks to ask his first name) is the face of the Zephyr to most of its customers. He greets them at the front desk, makes sure that VIPs are properly taken care of, and intervenes if any problems arise. He's unfailingly formal, but as deferential as

circumstances allow. He's also got an uncannily accurate sense of how many people are in the house at any time.

Bremmer is playing a very dangerous game. Though he's a trusted employee, he acts as an informer for one of Johnny Buttons' (p. 8) rivals, helping them keep tabs on Camino and his mob connections. Most of what he passes along is innocuous ("Jimmy Buttons and Muscles Madison were in last night; Muscles had a hatbox with him, kept it by his side all evening."). Even so, it's worth it to the rival mob to know just where their opponents are and what they're up to.

*Key Stats:* Diplomacy-13; Savoir-Faire-14.

## CANDY, THE CIGARETTE GIRL

Candy came from Charleston, South Carolina – well, it's really a little town called Hollywood just outside of Charleston but whenever she says "Hollywood" people think it's the one in California and she's never even *been* there and she just *laughs* and *laughs* so she just says Charleston – but anyway her mama and daddy named her Candy because they thought she was about the *sweetest* thing they ever done laid eyes on and everybody else just thought so too, so they were sweet to her to, and now she's all grown up and tries to be as sweet as she can be to everybody else and if you play your cards right then maybe she'll be sweet on *you*.

That, in a nutshell, is Candy, who makes the rounds of the club with a tray of cigarettes, gum, and other sundries hanging around her neck. She is, in many ways, as sweet as her name. She's pretty, affectionate, and a fiercely loyal friend. As the scion of a long-line of bootleggers, she can be surprisingly sneaky when she has to be. Unfortunately, she has no filter between her brain and her mouth. Anything she sees or hears, she'll tell someone else about sooner or later. In the circles she moves in, that could get her killed some day.

*Key Stats:* Carousing-13; Fast-Talk-13; Stealth-13.

*I hate cameras. They are  
so much more sure than  
I am about everything.*

*– John Steinbeck*

## LORETTA, THE CAMERA GIRL

If you're at the Zephyr, Loretta eventually will come by your table, camera in hand, and ask if you'd like a photograph as a souvenir of your evening. It's just a dollar, and it comes to you at your table in an hour, or it can be mailed to you later. It comes in a little paper frame with the Zephyr's logo on the cover.



Loretta actually works for the Swensen Photography Company around the corner, but the Zephyr is her beat.

The thing that people learn when they get to know Loretta is that she's got bigger plans. She wants to be a journalist, to tell important stories with pictures, but it's difficult to get a newspaper to take a "girl reporter" seriously. What they *don't* learn is that Loretta comes from money – and lots of it. Her family goes back to the Mayflower and controls a significant chunk of the shipping going in and out of New England. However, she wanted no part of choosing between a marriage to the "right" man (who bored her to tears) or life as a useless spinster, all but confined to a family compound in Rhode Island. So, she packed a few things, wrote the briefest possible note, and left to assume a fake last name. The family keeps private eyes on retainer, trying to pick up her trail. It'll be bad enough if they find her, but even worse if someone else figures it out first and decides she'd be worth a big ransom.

*Key Stats: Photography-14; Professional Skill (Journalist)-13.*

## LEE, THE BARTENDER

Grizzled and balding, Lee's been everywhere and done everything. He lied about his age when he was 15 to join the Merchant Marine, switched over to the Army some years later, drove trucks cross-country long before interstate highways, did a little cow-punching, worked on skyscrapers, got married three times . . . the list goes on for quite a while. He's got a great story about every one of them. He's also got a knack for using those stories like parables. Got a problem? Lee will listen sympathetically and, when you're ready, recollect a similar situation. You'll probably leave feeling better about it all.

Despite being everyone's friend, Lee's got a little problem playing the ponies. He loves the sport, but he's just terrible at picking winners, which gets expensive. He's in a trusted position behind the bar, so he could skim a little off the top, but his conscience won't let him. His conscience *will*, however, let him deal a little dope, which connects him to some exceptionally shady characters. Mr. Camino wouldn't like it, some of the local syndicates wouldn't be happy about it, and rivals of the dealers he buys from are pretty ruthless and would cause a *lot* of trouble if they showed up at the Zephyr.

*Key Stats: Bowling-14; Carousing-14; Guns (Shotgun)-14; Professional Skill (Bartender)-13.*

## EMIL, THE BAND LEADER

Slightly rounded, slightly balding, Emil doesn't strike anyone as anything special on first glance, but once he opens his mouth, he's captivating. He's certainly a competent musician and band leader, but it's his quick wit and showmanship, combined with Sicilian Joe's clarinet, that makes his band a going concern.

Emil's appeal isn't limited to music lovers. Ladies love him, and he loves them back. He's discrete as he can be, but it is, frankly, a wonder that neither his wife nor a string of other women's husbands and boyfriends haven't found out or done something about it. Yet.

*Key Stats: Lecherousness; Fast Talk-13; Performance-13; Sex Appeal-14.*

## Johnny Buttons and the Boys

Among the frequent visitors to the Zephyr Club is a guy known around town as Johnny Buttons. He's friends with the owner, and dating the lead singer. He spends enough to get special treatment when he shows up. Johnny got the name from a habit of wearing clothes with expensive pearl buttons, though that was really only a passing thing. Johnny and entourage will tell you that he's just a man with a variety of business interests (a small trucking and distributing company, partnership in a few hardware stores, and now stock in some local banks). It's only his detractors who accuse him of being a rising figure in a crime syndicate, with a gift for rubbing out just the right people at just the right time.

Johnny and his boys are rough characters, but they're not stupid. Cops and judges are individually corruptible, but the legal system is a not wholly owned subsidiary of the mob like it is in some cities. There's competition from rivals and other factions on top of that. They have no problems acting decisively when the situation calls for it, but they can't act with impunity. For them, the Zephyr and a few similar clubs are friendly territory. However, it's not their own property, so they won't commit crimes in the open there.

## SICILIAN JOE, THE CLARINET PLAYER

He'll tell you his parents named him Giuseppe, but everyone calls him Joe. He hardly knows a word of Italian (his parents didn't want to speak it after they left the old country, he says), but he's fluent in the clarinet. Joe's one of the best in town, and he's a major draw with the orchestra.

But Joe really *is* named Joe. And he's not Sicilian. His mother was mixed Scottish, French, and Cherokee, and his father was black. Though that might not matter to some, it certainly would to his landlord, his girlfriend, and possibly to his employer.

*Key Stats: Acting-13; Musical Instrument (Clarinet)-15.*

## DOLORES MORAN, SINGER

Tall, blonde (from a bottle, but an expensive and skillfully applied bottle), and a little icy, Dolores is the singer for the house band. She's been keeping company with Johnny Buttons, but that's not how she got the job. In fact, there's some talk that Dolores is how Johnny got *his* job, figuring out who to work with and who should be convinced to retire, and letting Johnny do the rest. There's also talk of her cutting a few records and maybe leaving the clubs behind.

Dolores was born Dottie Mertz, but nobody's used that name with her for years. She was married once, but her husband didn't care for her ambition to sing professionally. His business was also going downhill. He started to drink a lot, and when he did, he'd hit her. After nearly six months of it, she stabbed him as he stumbled toward her in a drunken rage.



She was on her way out the door before he hit the floor. She got a ticket on the next bus out of town and never looked back. Dolores mostly doesn't care, but sometimes she wakes up at night wondering what would happen if someone came after her.

*Key Stats:* Performance-13; Sex Appeal-13; Singing-14; Streetwise-14.

## THALES JOHNSTONE, THE JANITOR

Thales is probably the oldest member of the staff, but still in good shape and as sharp as anyone. He doesn't talk much about his past – indeed, he doesn't say much about anything. (Given the social milieu of the times, few of the overwhelmingly white staff and entirely white customers would think to speak with him). He's believed to be only two or three generations removed from slavery.

Wearing a worn but well-maintained dinner jacket, he works as washroom attendant in the men's room during open hours, padding his meager pay with tips. He's also in charge of cleaning up after hours.

A few weeks ago, while taking a short cut home through a cluttered alley, he tripped over a man with an alligator briefcase and a bullet through his heart. On impulse, Thales took the briefcase, wrapped it in torn brown paper, and ran. Now, for the first time in decades, he's completely at a loss for what to do. The briefcase contains an ancient-looking painting in an elaborate gold frame. (It's a medieval icon stolen from a

European cathedral, but he doesn't know that.) It's clearly worth a lot, enough for its previous holder to die for it, but what can *he* do with it? Petty criminals and small-time fences are a dime a dozen, but who can be trusted with something like this? And who might be willing to kill a second time to get it back?

*Key Stats:* Brawling-12; Housekeeping-14.

## MR. CAMINO, THE OWNER

He's not a bad guy by any stretch of the imagination, but he's not a particularly interesting one, either. Mr. Camino (Sam to his friends) leaves the charisma and showmanship to the orchestra and the rest of the staff; he excels as a businessman. He finds good people for the right positions and lets them do what they do best while he handles the money and the people problems. Camino's ancestors were Spanish, but he doesn't correct people who take him for Italian.

The Zephyr Club is, technically, a completely legitimate business (if you ignore the blind eye he turns to the patronage of racketeers). Keeping it that way isn't always easy. Johnny Buttons is friendly, but not necessarily *friends*. He'd love to buy a piece of the club. Mr. Camino can hold him off in good times, but a downturn in business might force him to consider it. Or maybe Johnny might get to the point where he just wants to sell some insurance, and there might not be any excuse not to buy it.

*Key Stats:* Administration-15; Streetwise-13.

*One day I had a nice office and a secretary on Madison Avenue; the next, I was in and out of every gin joint from Eighth Street to Houston, in the regular company of what used to be called bums – that was before they became the homeless.*

– Stuart Woods, *Imperfect Strangers*

# IN THE CAMPAIGN

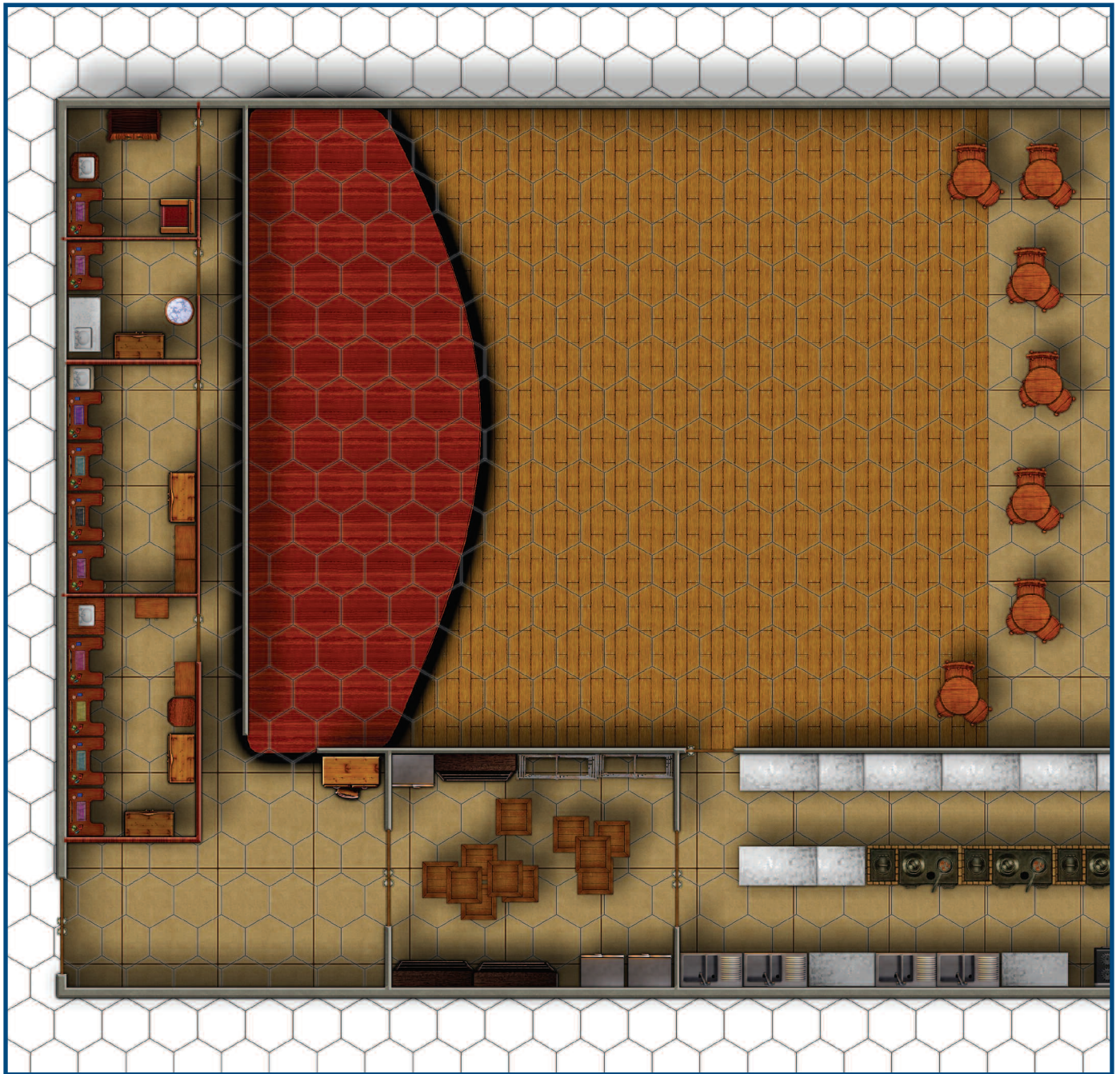
The location and period are intentionally left vague to allow the GM to place the Zephyr wherever it needs to go. As described, it can be set more or less without adjustment in any American city from the early 1930s into the 1960s. Within those bounds, concessions to the era can be minimal. For example, the music might be big-band jazz in the 1930s, moving heavily into swing by the late Depression, then to other forms like Brazilian jazz, bebop, and Sinatra-like crooners through the '50s. During wartime, there's a shelf of bottles reserved for military units whose members come through town; the soldiers drink free until the bottle's empty, then buy the next one.

With only a few more adjustments, the Zephyr Club can fit into a broader range of settings. For example, during Prohibition, the doors are heavy and opaque, and Dutch waits behind a tiny sliding window, only letting in those who know the password. In later decades, camera and cigarette girls fade away, but Candy and Loretta can become bartenders or waitresses. The house band can use a different style in later

decades, or retain a big-band influence to make the Zephyr deliberately retro. (Sicilian Joe might switch from clarinet to guitar, though by the '70s, the fact that he's bi-racial might become a curiosity rather than a deep secret.) With a few name and language changes, something like the Zephyr Club can be used in cities across the world, or the names can be retained to make it an oasis of American culture frequented by expatriates overseas.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Riggsby first saw *The Maltese Falcon* as a pre-teen in a 1920s movie palace. After knocking around the Barbary Coast and the brownstones of Boston, he hung up his trench coat as a numbers man in the medical systems racket. He's currently holed up with a dark-eyed dame, a kid who could be a spelling bee contender, and a pack of dogs who go down these mean streets and don't come back when they're called.



## MAP OF THE ZEPHYR CLUB (LARGE VERSION)

For a labeled version of this map, see p. 6.

*Here he sits at this wreck of a piano, in this dirty old crummy old joint that oughtta be inspected by the fire marshal, or anyway by the Board of Health.*

*– David Goodis, **Shoot the Piano Player***





## MAP OF THE ZEPHYR CLUB (LARGE VERSION)

For a labeled version of this map, see p. 6.

*I've heard it said: "There are no optimists or pessimists.  
There are only happy idiots or unhappy ones."*

*– Julie Kohler, in **The Bride Wore Black***

# THE GAMEABLE BOUNCER

BY JASON BRICK

From the gorilla in the nightclub's alley to the tuxedo-wearing doorman, bouncers are a fixture of noir stories. In some

*Candee was up on the stage, shaking her considerable assets, and all I could think about is how those yahoos at table six would settle down if she'd just put her clothes back on. That's the day I knew I had to quit working the clubs.*

tales, they're just furniture in the local dive. In others, they play allies, adversaries, and informants. Some noir pieces focus on the exploits or misadventures of doormen and club security. They've appeared in movies so many times, people think they understand what their world is like.

Most of those people are wrong. Working security in a bar has elements of confrontation and risk, but a bouncer's job is more about talking than fighting. He cares more about bringing in customers than throwing them out, and worries about lawsuits more often than right hooks.

For a GM populating a noir world, and for players looking for a gritty new character concept, these staples of the genre deserve a detailed and accurate treatment suitable for any **GURPS** campaign.

## THE JOB

Although the word "bouncer" first saw popular use in the late 19th century, bar security has been around for as long as there have been bars. Doormen even appear in ancient Mesopotamian mythology. For most of human history, security in a public house consisted of the owner – or his largest friend – and a big stick. Over the past 100 years or so, the role has evolved into its own specialized profession.

In the early noir years of the roaring '20s and Great Depression, club security was hired for their ability to enforce a club's policy – often by using an actual club. They kept out undesirables, including drunks, deadbeats, and local law enforcement. Size trumped skill, and getting tossed out of a bar often meant a serious beating. These were the bouncers of the detective novel, the jazz club, and the Depression-era honkytonk. They're what most people still think of when they imagine what this job is like.

After the war, club security grew more professional. Even smaller venues started using uniforms and writing down policies for ousting a troublesome customer. Negotiation, de-escalation, and other forms of social engineering became part of every bouncer's repertoire. As the United States grew increasingly more litigious, use of excessive force fell out of vogue.

Since the late 1990s, the job has become even more structured and regulated. Most states require licenses for on-site security. In states not requiring a license, insurance policies often mean bouncers get one anyway. Security chiefs hire for cool heads and people skills more than size or combat training.

Bouncers in all three eras *can* fight. Some even like fighting, but their first priority is to keep customers safe and the house

happy. Even winning a tussle can lose customers and break furniture, both of which can cost the owner a fortune. This leads to bouncing's first rule, which is arguably the only part of the job portrayed accurately in *Road House*.

## BE NICE

The thing about bouncing drunks for a living is that you're dealing with drunks. The inebriated are irrational by definition. They respond poorly to aggression, even when it comes from a sober and much larger person. However, it's easy to sway them with humor, kindness, and understanding. A good bouncer knows how to redirect a belligerent customer's stream of consciousness. He's polite and professional, even while escorting someone out of the building. The best have people thanking them on their way out the door.

## TEAM SPIRIT

No bouncer works alone. Even in small bars with just one doorman, he will work with the bartender when trouble starts. Teamwork is vital for safety, with all security staff watching one another's back throughout the night. It's a common tactic to surround a potentially troublesome drinker, intimidating him into submission through sheer numbers. Modern security teams use walkie-talkies or even tactical radios to keep the team coordinated and in touch.



## THE DARK SIDE

Bars are not the cleanest places. Even if the owner doesn't encourage drugs, crime, and violence, patrons will inevitably bring some with them. It's just part of the club scene. Like it or not, a bouncer eventually ends up in some kind of criminal situation. What he does about it is sometimes a matter of personal choice, but it is most often determined by his boss's attitude on the crime in question.

## THE DOOR

If a bar has only one person on the security team, that person is usually stationed at the door checking IDs and screening incoming customers for drunkenness. He also watches the street for incoming groups that look like trouble. Because it's

often outside, it's the most dangerous job on the security roster – and the one with the most direct customer interaction. This sometimes means the new guy gets stuck with the duty, but good facilities put their best people in this key position.

## THE RESTROOM

Bouncers hate the restroom. It's cramped. The floors are slick, and the walls sprout hard-edged sinks and toilets. It starts to smell halfway through a shift. It's where people go to buy and use drugs, have sex with fellow clubbers, or perform any of a thousand other kinds of nightclub malfeasance. Quarters are close, making it hard to get help from the rest of the team. A well-run security team runs regular restroom checks, but nobody likes doing it.

# SECURITY TACTICS

Those with strong combat training get security jobs more easily than other candidates, but soon learn they need to pick up a whole new set of skills. The conflicts a bouncer gets into are different from the mortal combat of a soldier or the sparring of a martial artist, and thus require a different kind of training and outlook.

## AWARENESS

Security isn't about responding to situations. It's about accurately predicting when a situation *might* happen, then intercepting it before it evolves into a problem. Bouncers watch body language. They get in tune with the vibe of each shift. They learn the personalities of regulars and local criminals. When standing still, they're positioned in high-traffic areas and the points with the best field of vision. The best consider any shift where they break something up to be a failure. Fights almost never happen without warning, and it's a bouncer's job to catch the signs.

## NEGOTIATION

When a bouncer first talks with a customer, it's well before he would have to ask that person to leave the bar. Instead, security engages a potentially troublesome group or individual when they first start to "get amped." They'll use body language, gestures and negotiation to calm a group down before they even hint at threatening physical force. One common trick is to approach a rowdy group and ask them to keep an eye out for potential trouble. It puts an impending liability on the security team's side, and keeps them in line for the rest of the night. A bouncer is happiest when he's doing his job so well that he never has to do his job.

## THE EIGHTY-SIX

Even the best club security team sometimes has to throw somebody out. When this happens, their priority is to get that person on the street with a minimum of drama, mess, and violence. Even in the "bad old days" of gorilla doormen, beatings

happened in the alley and out of sight. Bouncers never engage in a stand-up fight in the middle of the bar if they can help it. Once a troublemaker is safely outside, security will watch him leave the area. If he doesn't, they don't pursue him off bar property – they call the police.

## GANG VIOLENCE

Bouncers don't opt for a fair fight if they can help it. They gang up whenever possible, with as many allies as possible, on a single individual. This keeps everybody safe, even the person they're ganging up on. With numbers on their side, the security team is at less risk. With so many people swarming a single person, it's easier to control and remove him without having to hurt him in the process. Security also keeps an eye on the troublemaker's friends. Buddies don't always step in, but ignoring them leaves a bouncer vulnerable to attacks from behind – especially from the troublemaker's date.

## THE COPS

Bars attract unruly behavior and spawn public drunkenness, which means they attract law enforcement. Most bouncers get to know the local cops. How those cops view them depends on the kind of club they're working. Licensed security in a legitimate bar usually gets professional courtesy and benefit of the doubt. A group of thugs working the door at a gang club are as likely to get arrested as the people they kick out – assuming the police aren't also on the mob's payroll.

## AFTERMATH

A chucked-out drunk coming back for revenge is surprisingly rare in club security. It's been known to happen, but in most cases, they wander off in search of a drink someplace else. Ousted regulars routinely come in on another night with an apology for the security crew. An exception here is local gangs, who might return in numbers later that evening, or retaliate with vandalism against the bar itself.

# CREATING A BOUNCER

Bouncers seem built for adventuring, possessing the attributes and skill needed to hang at the 75- to 100-point level – including a fair distribution of combat skills. Improved ST and HT are important to surviving life in club security. Improved IQ contributes to the noncombat aspects of the life, but a stereotypical bouncer will have average or below-average intelligence, with points spent to improve Per and social skills. Improved HP and FP are never a poor investment for characters in this line of work.

A “gorilla” bouncer will be heavy on improved physical attributes, and physical advantages like Fit, Hard to Subdue,

High Pain Threshold, Peripheral Vision, and Rapid Healing. Long hours working in the dark can build a level or two of Night Vision – the better to see what’s happening in the dark corners of the bar. A professional bouncer relies on “gift of gab” far more than on combat abilities – and invests in positive Appearance, Charisma, Empathy, Rapier Wit, and Social Chameleon. Common Sense, Danger Sense, and Unfazeable are found in many club security veterans.

If he’s worked in a club or neighborhood for any significant length of time, a bouncer’s public position develops a network of ties and status. Allies, Contacts and Contact Groups, Favors, Patrons, and several Reputations are all natural perks of the job. Of course, negative Reputations and even the occasional Enemy are all-too-common risks.

Some disadvantages make perfect matches for the central-casting bouncer: negative Appearance, Bully, Fat, Gigantism, and Unfit. Real-life security workers are often afflicted with Addiction, Alcoholism, Compulsive Behavior, and Lecherousness. For the impassive doorman motif, Callous, Code of Honor, Incurious and Sense of Duty all fit that mold. Newer team members might come to the job with an Overconfidence problem.

Other disadvantages are never a good idea for prospective security workers. Bad Temper, Berserk, and Bloodlust will land a bouncer out of work or in the hoosegow. Combat Paralysis and Gullibility keep the person from successfully performing the basic duties of the job. Most crippling disadvantages, like One Leg or Blind, make a person unsuitable for work in security. One exception here is a minor disability that ended a career in professional sports, military, or law enforcement. The skills and training of these early retirees often make a club owner overlook somebody with Chronic Pain, One Eye, or a similar disadvantage.

Essential bouncer skills include Diplomacy, Fast-Talk, Search, and some kind of unarmed combat skill. Other skills found in experienced security include Area Knowledge, Body Language, Carousing, Criminology (for former or aspiring police), Detect Lies, First Aid, Gambling, Holdout, Guns of all sorts, Interrogation, Intimidation, Lip Reading, various Melee Weapons, Streetwise, and Tactics (for veterans). Bouncers are rarely just bouncers, so off-the-wall skills reflecting other aspirations and interests are never out of place. This is especially true for short-timers, those who came to the job after an earlier career, or who are working security to pay the bills while training for something else.

## Bouncer Techniques

Security professionals learn a variety of techniques that help them survive the roughest parts of the job. For some, this comes from formal training as part of a licensing program or seminar. Others develop these skills through hours of observation and hard-knocks education.

Techniques from *GURPS Basic Set* that serve bouncers well include Arm Lock, Choke Hold, and Finger Lock. *GURPS Martial Arts* describes several more. Specifically, Disarming, Evade, Handcuffing, Head Lock, Leg Grapple, Leg Lock, Scissors Hold, Trip, and Wrist Lock are excellent choices for club security.

Many experienced bouncers have also perfected one or both of the following optional techniques.

### Bum’s Rush

Hard

*Defaults:* Brawling-3, Judo-2, Sumo Wrestling-2, or Wrestling-2.

*Prerequisites:* Brawling, Judo, Sumo Wrestling, or Wrestling; cannot exceed prerequisite skill.

If you’ve grappled a foe and you’re both standing, you may attempt to walk at your full Move, dragging him along! This counts as an attack. To do so, *win* a Quick Contest of Bum’s Rush vs. the highest of his ST, DX, or best grappling skill. If you have him in a lock or hold, you get +3, you may default this from your level in that technique (if better), and the subject gets +3 for High Pain Threshold or -4 for Low Pain Threshold.

If you shove (p. B372) the target on the turn immediately following a Bum’s Rush, while you still have him grappled, add the number of yards you just moved to the damage roll – but *only* for the purpose of determining knockback. You may also combine a Bum’s Rush and shove into a special Move and Attack; use the rules above, but at an extra -4.

### Group Grappling

Hard

*Default:* Judo or Wrestling.

*Prerequisites:* Judo or Wrestling; cannot exceed prerequisite skill+4.

If one of your allies has a foe pinned *or* in an Arm Lock, Choke Hold, Finger Lock, or Leg Lock, you may default grappling techniques used on that foe from Group Grappling instead of your grappling skill, if better. For example, if you have Wrestling-13 and Group Grappling (Wrestling)-15, your Arm Lock is normally 13, but against a foe pinned by a friend, it’s 15.



# BOUNCER TEMPLATES

No matter where you work, the security team always seems made up of the same five or six personalities. Here are three that make for good character templates. Each comes up a couple dozen points short of a 100-point player character, leaving room for those other skills and interests security workers inevitably have.

## The Jock

76 points

Martial-arts buffs, college athletes rounding out a scholarship, and gym rats all have muscles and know how to use them. This makes it easy for them to find work in club security. They don't talk as much as other types who get into the field, instead letting their physiques handle the communication. This template can also represent a former pro making ends meet after a shortened career.

**Attributes:** ST 12 [20]; DX 11 [20]; IQ 9 [-20]; HT 12 [20].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Damage 1d-1/1d+2; BL 29 lbs.; HP 12 [0]; Will 9 [0]; Per 10 [5]; FP 12 [0]; Basic Speed 5.75 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Security License [1]. • 20 points chosen from among ST +1 or +2 [10 or 20], FP +1 to +3 [3/FP], Arm ST [5/level]†, Fit [5] or Very Fit [15], or Lifting ST [3/level]†.

**Disadvantages:** -20 points chosen from among Addiction (Steroids or other performance-enhancing drug) [-5], Addiction (Recreational drug) [-15], Bully [-10\*], Chronic Pain (Mild; 2 hours; 9 or less) [-5], Code of Honor (Professional or something similar) [-5], Enemy (Rival team; 9 or less) [-5], Jealousy [-10], Noisy [-2/level], or Overconfidence [-5\*].

**Primary Skills:** Sports (any) (A) DX+2 [8]-13. • *Either* Boxing or Wrestling, both (A) DX [2]-11. • 4 points spent on sports or unarmed combat techniques.

**Secondary Skills:** *Two* of Area Knowledge (any) (E) IQ+1 [2]-10; Axe/Mace (A) DX [2]-11; Carousing (E) HT+1 [2]-13; Games (any) (E) IQ+1 [2]-10; Intimidation (A) Will [2]-9; or Sports (any) (A) DX [2]-12.

**Background Skills:** 8 points spent on athletic skills such as Bicycling, Jumping, Sports (any), Swimming, or Throwing. • 4 points spent on academic skills such as Psychology or History (reflecting a college jock) or on Professional Skills (A) DX or IQ (reflecting an amateur athlete).

*All you have to do is follow three simple rules. One, never underestimate your opponent. Expect the unexpected. Two, take it outside. Never start anything inside the bar unless it's absolutely necessary. And three, be nice.*

– Dalton, in *Road House*

\* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

† Not a realistic advantage! May require Special Exercises if available at all; ask your GM.

## Bouncing and Martial Arts

A lot of martial artists end up bouncing, and a lot of bouncers end up taking some kind of martial arts. It's a natural fit on both sides of the equation. Yet, not all martial arts are created equal when it comes to subduing a rowdy drunk. Krav Maga, for example, is a bit too deadly. Kenjutsu uses a sword most bars won't allow their employees to carry.

**GURPS Martial Arts** lists a variety of martial arts styles particularly well-suited for this kind of work. These include Aikido, Aikijutsu, Jeet Kun Do, Jujutsu (Traditional and Brazilian), Pankration, Sumo and various forms of Wrestling. Soldiers-turned-doormen might spend points on Military Hand-to-Hand, Bartitsu, or Fairbairn Close Combat Systems.

## The Soldier

66 points

Military make good security. They know about confrontation. They know weapons. They know how to follow orders. A lot of security teams have at least one reservist on the roster. However, soldiers don't just come from the armed forces. A retired cop is considered a soldier, too. So are the thugs at the door of a certain kingpin's "gentlemen's club."

**Attributes:** ST 11 [10]; DX 11 [20]; IQ 10 [0]; HT 11 [10].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Damage 1d-1/1d+1; BL 24 lbs.; HP 13 [4]; Will 10 [0]; Per 11 [5]; FP 11 [0]; Basic Speed 5.50 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Security License [1]. • 20 points chosen from among HT +1 or +2 [10 or 20], Per +1 to +3 [5/level], Combat Reflexes [15], Contact Group (Military unit, police precinct or gang, etc.; Skill-12; 9 or less, Usually Reliable) [10], Danger Sense [15], Fit [5], High Pain Threshold [10], Military Rank 1 [5], Unfazeable [15], or Wealth (Comfortable) [10].

**Disadvantages:** -20 points chosen from among Alcoholism [-15], Callous [-5], Intolerance (Against enemy gang or nationality of conflict where deployed) [-5], Hard of Hearing [-10], Hidebound [-5], Incurious [-5\*], Nightmares [-5\*], Sense of Duty (Call to service; 9 or less) [-5], or Wealth (Struggling) [-10].

**Primary Skills:** Guns (Pistol or Rifle) (E) DX+1 [2]-12 and Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-12. • *Two* of First Aid (E) IQ+1 [2]-11; Search (A) Per [2]-11; Streetwise (A) IQ [2]-10; or Guns (not taken earlier) (E) DX+1 [2]-12.

**Secondary Skills:** *Two* of Area Knowledge (any) (E) IQ+1 [2]-11; Carousing (E) HT+1 [2]-12; Detect Lies (H) Per-1 [2]-10; Savoir-Faire (Criminal, Military, or Police) (E) IQ+1 [2]-11; Search (A) Per [2]-11; or Tactics (H) IQ-1 [2]-9.

**Background Skills:** *Two* of Criminology (A) IQ [2]-10; Expert Skill (any that reflects a service assignment or similar training) (H) IQ-1 [2]-9; Guns (any) (E) DX+1 [2]-12; Knife (E) DX+1 [2]-12; Professional Skill (any) (A) DX [2]-11 or (A) IQ [2]-10; or Soldier (A) IQ [2]-10.

\* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

† Represents a military pension or disability check in addition to regular income.

## The Face

72 points

Not all security is on the job because of their muscles. Some have a talent for talking down unruly customers, and use their ability to defuse the drunkest and rowdiest. It's a gift for some; the result of long experience for many others. Most female bouncers fall into this template, since they need to make up for their smaller size and lower strength.

### Perk: Security License

This is a very limited version of the Law Enforcement Powers advantage. Licensed security guards, including bouncers, have no special powers to arrest, detain, or harm other people. However, their status allows them to use physical force to protect a location and the people in that location. Excessive force is still punishable, but police generally give licensed security officers leeway they wouldn't give an unlicensed civilian. In some places, this perk is a prerequisite of obtaining a job as a bouncer. See *License* in **Power-Ups 2: Perks** (p. 18) for some potential game effects of this trait.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 10 [0].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Security License [1]. • 25 points chosen from among Appearance (Attractive *or* Handsome) [4 or 12], Charisma 1 or 2 [5 or 10], Common Sense [10], Empathy [15], Fashion Sense [5], Rapier Wit [5], or Social Chameleon [5].

**Disadvantages:** -20 points chosen from among Addiction (Recreational drug) [-15], Alcoholism [-15], Chummy [-5], Debt (From excessive partying) [-1/level], Gregarious [-10], Lecherous [-15\*], Post-Combat Shakes [-5\*], or Social Disease [-5].

**Primary Skills:** Fast Talk (A) IQ+2 [8]-14. • *Either* Diplomacy (H) IQ+1 [8]-13 or Sex Appeal (A) HT+2 [8]-12.

**Secondary Skills:** *Three* of Area Knowledge (any) (E) IQ+1 [2]-13; Body Language (A) Per [2]-12; Carousing (E) HT+1 [2]-11; Intimidation (A) Will [2]-12; Lip Reading (A) Per [2]-12; or *Savoir-Faire* (any) (E) IQ+1 [2]-13.

**Background Skills:** *Two* of Boxing (A) DX [2]-10; Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-11; Dancing (A) DX [2]-10; Detect Lies (H) Per-1 [2]-11; Erotic Art (A) DX [2]-10; Gambling (A) IQ [2]-12; or Wrestling (A) DX [2]-10.

\* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

# A BOUNCER-CENTRIC SETTING

*Of all the gin joints in all the cities in all the worlds in an increasingly infinite number of realities, she had to walk into mine . . .*

The Fleur-de-Lis Bar seems like nothing special: just a smoky bar in a disused corner of that one block just on the good side of the bad side of town. One long bar, with a few tables along the outside wall. Dartboards and a pool table in the back. If you woke up there after a long drunk, you'd couldn't tell from the floor which bar you'd passed out in. It's just a watering hole, like thousands of others. Belly-up to the bar, you could be drinking in any city, anywhere.

Thing is, the Fleur-de-Lis could *literally* be anywhere. The original owner, now long dead, was a gifted superscientist who turned half of the basement into a parachronic projector and teleportation device capable of moving the bar from city to city and world to world. In transit, the device somehow knows to subtly alter the interior to match what's normal for its next destination. The bar always "lands" in an appropriate empty storefront.

Since its creation, the Fleur-de-Lis has passed through a few hands, but it's always found near sources of action and profit – like the *Millennium Falcon* with a juke box. Dan Brandl, the current owner, trusts the projector to take him where he can rake in the cash. Conflict breeds drinkers and high bar tabs, as well as opportunity for the odd bit of profiteering. He occasionally even ends up doing a good deed.

It's not without risk. Troubles start with the general inconveniences of setting up shop in a new town and time stream. Local gangs want protection money, cops need their palms greased, and the Fleur-de-Lis always seems to land just a few

miles or days away from some kind of war. Add to that the I-cops' general attitude toward rogue jumpers, a less-than-cordial relationship with Centrum, and the occasional accidental projection to an inhospitable world, and the bar always has need for a few good bouncers.

Enter the PCs. Forming the security team at the Fleur-de-Lis, they spend their nights maintaining order among the drinkers, and "interfacing" with local thugs and law enforcement. When the bar's not open, they help Brandl resolve whatever profitable schemes he can find in their new temporary home.

This is a campaign about mercenary antics, profiteering, action, and fun. The party will drink shot for shot with the Three Musketeers one night, slaughter Nazis the next, and outwit Infinity agents the following week. Drunken brawls follow tense, armed negotiations, and lead to deadly firefights or daring escapes. More than one Fleur-de-Lis bouncer has died holding off a horde of bad guys while Brandl or a predecessor got the projector spun up for an emergency escape.

Adventures are as limitless as the worlds the Fleur-de-Lis visits. Characters can be just as varied; the bar picks up its security crew wherever they find a likely candidate.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Brick is a freelance writer whose 30-year gaming habit has included all four versions of *GURPS* and countless other systems. His work can be found in print and dead tree magazines worldwide. In his spare time, he enjoys travel, martial arts, and time with his family. Read more at his blog, [brickcommajason.com](http://brickcommajason.com).



# HUMAN, FLAWED

BY MICHELE ARMELLINI

What is a noir movie, or adventure, made of? Among other things, eerie streets at night, smoky rooms, Venetian blinds, shots in the dark.

All of that, however, has to be made alive by people. For a story to really look noir, certain characters are required. Private eyes or police detectives to do the snooping are nearly a must. However, since these are the protagonists, they'll be the player characters, and the players themselves will want to come up with their own hard-boiled investigators. The GM, meanwhile, will invest time in detailing his own dark lady, and in customizing a creepy arch-villain. The latter will also need a number of faceless goons, but those are no great effort to create.

What tier is not covered? The secondary NPCs, those that the Academy Awards call "supporting actors" and, one step behind them, the "character" actors. If these are all two-dimensional cookie-cutter plot pushers, the movie – or the RPG adventure – will sound flat. In other instances, they might earn that Oscar (like Van Heflin in *Johnny Eager*) in

a movie, or make an adventure more enjoyable, if they are lively, credible and, above all, suitable for the genre.

Noir movies don't look kindly on humanity. The protagonist is often washed up and jaded. At most he has some personal standards, but they are unlikely to be approved of by any district attorney or priest. The leading lady is ambiguous and her usual opening move is to lie to the protagonist.

Likewise, the supporting cast for noir adventures or campaigns doesn't line up with square-jawed sidekicks and wholesome girls next door. These people can be met in a dark alley, a sleazy hotel, a police station, or a private investigator's office. They are human; they are flawed.

## Recommend Reading

*GURPS Cops* and *GURPS Mysteries* were used in writing this article. All of the firearms mentioned in this article can be found in *GURPS High Tech*.

## THE SASSY SECRETARY

The sassy secretary is an archetype of the genre since *The Maltese Falcon*. In the 1941 movie, she was Sam Spade's personal assistant, Effie Perine (played by Lee Patrick).

Susan Parks is the no-nonsense office girl working for a private investigator, presumably one of the PCs. She's outspoken, even impertinent, always wisecracking. She can put nearly everybody in his place just by her trademark stinging retorts. Even obviously dangerous guys won't easily shake her detached demeanor. She's more than willing to give lip to her employer, too, whenever she deems it fit.

Of course, she's there to answer the phone, type the reports, and keep the office running, but the employer puts up with her because she's much more valuable than this. For starters, she feels a Sense of Duty toward him, even though they aren't engaged (at least, not currently). Moreover, sometimes she'll point out the easily missed detail, find the apparently unconnected but revealing trivia in her magazines, relay the critical piece of information, or serve as a sounding board when the private eye thinks aloud.

Susan is not without fault. The reason why *she* puts up with this job is that she's not ambitious; it's her Laziness, which will often affect her performance. Her Independent Income explains how she can make do with the wages her employer can afford to pay.

### Variants

The relation between Susan and her employer might well involve further advantages for both, such as Ally, or just for the secretary, such as Patron. There might be a love story in the making, too.

Mike Hammer's secretary, Velda, is more hard-boiled than Parks. Velda is taller, stronger, and sexier. In *Vengeance Is Mine!* she has her own private-eye license, and she keeps a semiautomatic pistol in her handbag.

### She'll Say

"Thank you for your efforts, but we have no flies in the room presently. You can keep your mouth shut."

## SUSAN PARKS

65 points

Susan Parks is a nice-looking, petite brunette in her late 20s who keeps her nails short and her makeup to a minimum. She speaks loudly and often.

**ST** 10 [0]; **DX** 11 [20]; **IQ** 11 [20]; **HT** 10 [0].

Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [5]; Per 11 [0]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.25 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8. 5'4"; 120 lbs.

*Look at me, Sam. You worry me. You always think you know what you're doing, but you're too slick for your own good.*

– Effie Perine,  
in *The Maltese Falcon*

## Social Background

TL: 6 [0].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

## Advantages

Appearance (Attractive) [4]; Common Sense [10]; Contact (City council employee; Administration-15; 9 or less; Somewhat Reliable) [2]; Independent Income 2 [2]; Unfazeable [15].

Perks: Stinging Retort\*. [1]

## Disadvantages

Laziness [-10]; Pacifism (Cannot Kill) [-15]; Sense of Duty (Employer) [-2].

Quirks: Can't abstain from wisecracking. [-1]

## Skills

Accounting (H) IQ-1 [2]-10; Acting (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Current Affairs/TL6 (Popular Culture) (E) IQ [1]-11; Detect Lies (H) Per-1 [2]-10; Fast-Talk (A) IQ+1 [4]-12; Research/TL6 (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Savoir-Faire (E) IQ [1]-11; Typing (E) DX+1 [2]-12.

\* *Stinging Retort*: Gets +1 to Fast-Talk rolls if these are used to get others to stop annoying or harassing her. If successful, the harasser will also remain momentarily speechless and look stupid.

# THE CHILDHOOD FRIEND GONE BAD

John Sutton was the best friend of one of the PCs. He was gifted with a bright intelligence, an exceptional memory, and a nice voice. An up-and-coming lawyer, he married the right woman. Then he wasted everything due to his vice, gambling. He can no longer work as a lawyer (and those who are active in this field know about that). His beloved daughter remains a Dependent for him, but she lives with his estranged wife.

John may turn out to be connected with the main plot events. He may have been a victim's or perpetrator's counsel before being disbarred, so he has some key background information. Alternatively, he's a witness. If he's someone in a continuing campaign, he might be of some help to the adventurers. Even if he can't officially do his chosen profession, he can still show up to pay bails or provide informal legal advice or negotiation skills.

The most important thing, however, is John's link with his childhood friend. Maybe John helped the PC years ago. He could show up and ask the hero for some form of aid that will put the party in a quandary. Or, conversely, he might offer or be asked for assistance, and fail to deliver at a critical juncture. Possibly, the money he owes to bookmakers turns from a Debt into an Enemy as he misses a deadline and the enforcers come to teach him a lesson. So he won't be where his friend needs him.

Alternatively, John might outright betray the party. Maybe the hero considers John a friend, but the reverse is not true. For a more melodramatic take, John is forced to let his friend down because the opposition threatened (or kidnapped!) his child.

In the closing scenes, John might redeem himself, possibly at a high price.

## Variants

It would be no less useful to a group of investigators if John were a physician who lost his license. He could still patch up wounds without asking awkward questions, inform the investigators about a criminal who demanded such a service, or go over an autopsy report. The GM should replace Law, Merchant, Public Speaking, and Writing with Surgery, Diagnosis, Physician, and Research.

The relationship between John and his childhood friend might be represented by a Favor owed to John.

## He'll Say

"Please, my friend – for old time's sake!"

## JOHN SUTTON

70 points

John is a slim, fair-haired, middle-aged man with an easy smile and a warm, attractive voice. He wears an old suit and has a tan line on his wrist, where his expensive watch used to be.

**ST** 11 [10]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 13 [60]; **HT** 10 [0].



Damage 1d-1/1d+1; BL 24 lbs.; HP 11 [0]; Will 12 [-5]; Per 13 [0]; FP 10 [0].  
Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8.  
5'9"; 140 lbs.

## Social Background

TL: 6 [0].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

## Advantages

Contact (Eddie Cutrera the bookmaker; Streetwise-15; 12 or less; Unreliable) [2]; Eidetic Memory (Photographic) [10]; Pitiabile [5]; Voice [10].

Perks: Honest Face. [1]

## Disadvantages

Compulsive Gambling (6) [-10]; Debt 5 [-5]; Dependent (Young daughter; Built on 50%; 6 or less; Loved One) [-5]; Reputation -2 (Disbarred lawyer; To those who work in this field;

All the time) [-3]; Social Stigma (Criminal Record) [-5]; Wealth (Struggling) [-10].

Quirks: Distractible. [-1]

## Skills

Connoisseur (Visual Arts) (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Diplomacy (H) IQ [1]-13\*; Driving/TL6 (Automobile) (A) DX [2]-10; Gambling (A) IQ [2]-13; Law (Civil Law) (H) IQ [4]-13; Merchant (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Psychology (H) IQ-2 [1]-11; Public Speaking (A) IQ+2 [2]-15\*; Savoir-Faire (E) IQ [1]-13; Writing (A) IQ-1 [1]-12.

\* Includes +2 from Voice.

*I'm the only "cause"  
I'm interested in.  
– Rick Blaine, in Casablanca*

# THE DIRTY COP

Thatcher, an aging police sergeant, is a loose cannon in town, cocked and loaded. He certainly is a bad cop, and therefore, he can be bought, but not reliably so. In fact, he can often keep his Greed in check, but the same doesn't apply to his other bad traits. Notoriously, he sometimes manhandles and arrests criminals even when they could pay him hefty bribes. And woe unto the suspect whom he has in his sights. Policemen and lowlifes alike know about this, and they all steer clear of Thatcher. The exception is his Ally, a young officer he calls the Rookie. This man admires Thatcher to the point that he's putty in Thatcher's hands. The Rookie will cover for him, maybe even take the fall for him.

It's not as if Thatcher were a skilled policeman or a truly effective fighter. He's deadly because he's ruthless. His idea of his duty is to rough up the suspects. Being Callous gives him +1 to Intimidation if he uses threats or violence – which he will.

Thatcher will obviously be on a collision course with the heroes. Initially, he can be a sort of competitor in the adventure, messing with their suspects and witnesses, spoiling surveillance operations, and taking offense at their very involvement with "police affairs." If the investigators don't back off, he'll become an Enemy. No holds will be barred. He'll harass the PCs, and even try to frame them with false charges.

As bad as Thatcher is, the cops of *L.A. Confidential* aren't much better.

## Variants

Thatcher as portrayed here dislikes the whole world, but he can be customized by means of . . . more intense dislikes. These can make him even nastier (for instance, a racial Intolerance) or slightly less so (he might consider certain crimes as beyond

the pale, and never accept bribes in those cases – a specific Intolerance, or a Vow).

Thatcher would be even more dangerous if he could count on a senior officer as a Patron, approving of his methods.

## He'll Say

"I told you not to mess with the police."

## The Iron

Thatcher has replaced his standard-issue revolver with a fine-quality S&W .357 Magnum; that alone raises eyebrows at the precinct because of the cost. He keeps a 12G shotgun (an Ithaca Model 37) in his car trunk. Finally, he packs a small S&W Safety Hammerless in an ankle holster. This isn't just his backup gun: it can only be traced to a burglary, so that he can drop it to create false evidence.

## PATRICK THATCHER

90 points

A balding veteran, but stout and hard-faced, Thatcher is always in uniform.

ST 12 [20]; DX 12 [40]; IQ 11 [20]; HT 10 [0].

Damage 1d-1/1d+2; BL 29 lbs.; HP 12 [0]; Will 11 [0]; Per 11 [0]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.50 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 9.  
5'11"; 170 lbs.

## Social Background

TL: 6 [0].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

## Advantages

Ally (The Rookie; Built on 50%; 12 or less; Minion, +50%) [6]; Fearlessness 2 [4]; High Pain Threshold [10]; Legal Enforcement Powers 1 [5]; Police Rank 2 [10].

*Perks:* Dirty Fighting; SOP (Back to the Wall). [2]

*I admire you as a policeman – particularly your adherence to violence as a necessary adjunct to the job.*

– Captain  
Dudley Smith,  
in *L.A. Confidential*

## Disadvantages

Addiction (Tobacco) [-5]; Bad Temper (12) [-10]; Bully (12) [-10]; Callous [-5]; Duty (Police; 12 or less) [-10]; Greed (15) [-7]; Reputation -2 (Violent, bribable, unpredictable; To criminals and cops; All the time) [-3].

*Quirks:* Dislikes all civilians; Somewhat jealous of anybody better off than him. [-2]

## Skills

Area Knowledge (City) (E) IQ [1]-11; Brawling (E) DX [1]-12; Driving/TL6 (Automobile) (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Fast-Draw (Pistol) (E) DX [1]-12; Forced Entry (E) DX [1]-12; Guns/TL6 (Pistol) (E) DX+1 [2]-13; Guns/TL6 (Shotgun) (E) DX [1]-12; Intimidation (A) Will+1 [4]-12; Law (Local Criminal Law) (H) IQ-2 [1]-9; Search (A) Per-1 [1]-10; Shortsword (A) DX [2]-12; Streetwise (A) IQ+1 [4]-12; Wrestling (A) DX [2]-12.

## Techniques

Arm Lock (Wrestling) (A) [1]-13; Choke Hold (Wrestling) (H) [2]-10.

# THE UNDERESTIMATED DANCER

The lead female role will often be a cunning dark lady, but a secondary character may be a naïve blonde (like Doll in *The Asphalt Jungle*) or a not-too-bright nightclub performer (like Gaye in *Key Largo* – another Oscar-winning secondary character). Maya Searing appears to be both: a dancer who is the mistress of a gangster neglecting her, and a dumb blonde. She's beautiful, but she's also vulgar, brash, and always saying something stupid.

That's a mask, however. Maya (real name: Madeleine Snodgrass) is smarter than she seems. Born in the wrong family in the wrong neighborhood, she quickly understood that the men she'd meet disliked intelligent women, and feared intelligent *and* beautiful women. So, she began playing a part and never stopped. It's her Secret (together with the glasses she never wears in public). She's a good dancer, too. Her pragmatism breaks down when it comes to her Delusion: she dreams of becoming a singer, even though she's hopeless.

Her man, "Two-Fisted" Mickey, is unlikely as the arch-villain. He's not a larger-than-life bad guy, as the genre requires. Still, he might be involved in the case the heroes are investigating; maybe he provided the true mastermind with the muscle or the premises. Maya could have overheard interesting things. The nightclub, owned in part by Mickey, may also be a key location. But when the investigators meet Maya, they'll probably take her at face value, and she'll happily deceive them. In fact, while Mickey does neglect her, she's staunchly loyal to him (and he'll help her if needed). If the PCs go after her man, she'll be an unwelcome surprise for them.

## Variants

Maya's vulgarity is part of her façade, but it's not an act. She couldn't shrug that off even if she wanted. If she could,

however, the change when she eventually drops the mask would be even more shocking.

A darker version has Maya as a *formerly* good dancer; she's 10 years older, and she has taken to the bottle. Albeit desperate and jealous of younger women, she remains loyal to Mickey.

## She'll Say

"Ooh, wow, that was damn exciting, wasn't it? I must tell Mickey about it!"

## The Iron

She never carries, but Mickey has provided her with a tiny Vest Pocket Colt Automatic, just in case. It's in a drawer in the nightclub office.

## MAYA SEARING

140 points

A beautiful woman in her early 30s, Maya has a dancer's body, graceful but strong. Excessive makeup, platinum hair and revealing outfits go well with the image she chose.

**ST** 11 [10]; **DX** 13 [60]; **IQ** 11 [20]; **HT** 11 [10].  
Damage 1d-1/1d+1; BL 24 lbs.; HP 11 [0]; Will 11 [0]; Per 12 [5]; FP 12 [3].  
Basic Speed 6.00 [0]; Basic Move 6 [0]; Dodge 9.  
5'7"; 145 lbs.

## Social Background

*TL:* 6 [0].  
*CF:* Western [0].  
*Languages:* English (Native) [0].

## Advantages

Appearance (Beautiful) [12]; Fit [5]; Patron (Two-Fisted Mickey; 9 or less) [10]; Perfect Balance [15].

## Disadvantages

Bad Sight (Nearsighted; Mitigator, Eyeglasses, -60%) [-10]; Delusion (“I’ll become a great nightclub singer”) [-5]; Odious Personal Habit (Vulgarity) [-5]; Reputation -1 (Mickey’s Dumb Blonde; To the underworld and nightclub goers; 10 or less) [-1]; Secret (Actually much brighter than she appears, and needs glasses) [-5]; Sense of Duty (Two-Fisted Mickey) [-2].

*Quirks:* Incompetence (Singing); Nosy. [-2]

## Skills

Acrobatics (H) DX-1 [1]-12\*; Acting (A) IQ+1 [4]-12; Area Knowledge (Local) (E) IQ [1]-11; Carousing (A) HT [1]-11; Current Affairs/TL6 (People) (E) IQ [1]-11; Dancing (A) DX+1 [4]-14; Filch (A) DX-1 [1]-12; Holdout (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Makeup/TL6 (E) IQ [1]-11; Performance (A) IQ [1]-11†; Sex

*Gaye Dawn: But you promised!*

*Johnny Rocco: So what?*

*Gaye Dawn: You said that . . .*

*Johnny Rocco: But you were rotten.*

– *Key Largo*

Appeal (A) HT+4 [2]-15‡; Singing (E) HT-4 [1]-7§; Streetwise (A) IQ-1 [1]-10.

\* Includes +1 from Perfect Balance.

† Bought up from Acting default.

‡ Includes +4 from Appearance.

§ Includes -4 from Incompetence.

# THE STREET CONTACT

This character is ready-made to become the investigators’ contact in the underworld. He’s no longer a full-time crook, but he still knows everybody, or at least about everybody. Occasionally, he will still be hired for some minor task. Otherwise, he may have a legitimate job, usually janitorial duties in seedy motels. Unfortunately, he’s often “between jobs,” because the booze he can’t do without will get him fired, sooner or later. Occasionally, he’ll panhandle, and insistently demand tips (whence his nickname) for trivial services, like keeping a door open.

His true source of income is selling information about the underworld. That’s a dangerous Secret – if the wrong people come to know he’s a rat, he’ll better leave town. Jerry currently deals with a police detective who counts as a Patron to him, but he would be happy to increase his customer base! If the investigators begin buying information from Jerry, however, they should be careful. He’s likely to be Unreliable, or at most Somewhat Reliable (see p. B44). He won’t be above playing his buyers one against the other to get a better deal, selling false information if he has nothing else, or warning the opposition.

Note that if he’s working in a motel or other similar venue, “Tip” might gather information about people who aren’t criminals, but have something to hide. He has a knack for overhearing conversations and assessing the truthfulness of what he hears.

## Variants

While this is a realistic portrayal of the street contact, some fictional investigators are luckier, and get an informant who is more trustworthy.

## He’ll Say

“C’mon, man; that’s worth a nicer tip!”

## The Iron

Jerry will refuse any job that requires being armed. However, if it’s his life that’s at stake, he’ll easily find some cheap firearm, with a preference for sawed-off shotguns.

## JERRY “TIP” JONES

10 points

Jerry is a thin man in his 40s, with stooping shoulders. His face shows he’s an alcoholic, and his clothes that he’s poor.

**ST** 10 [0]; **DX** 10 [10]; **IQ** 11 [20]; **HT** 10 [0].

Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 9 [-2]; Will 11 [0]; Per 11 [0]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8. 5’8”; 130 lbs.

## Social Background

*TL:* 6 [0].

*CF:* Western [0].

*Languages:* English (Native) [0].

## Advantages

Absolute Direction [5]; Acute Hearing 2 [4]; Contact Group (Local underworld; Skill-12; 12 or less; Somewhat Reliable) [10]; Patron (His police contact; 9 or less) [10]; Sensitive [5].

*Perks:* Dabbler\*; Friend (To be customized). [2]

## Disadvantages

Alcoholism [-15]; Secret (Informant) [-20]; Social Stigma (Criminal Record) [-5]; Status -1 [-5]; Wealth (Poor) [-15].

*Quirks:* Humble. [-1]



## Skills

Acting (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Area Knowledge (Neighborhood) (E) IQ+1 [2]-12; Carousing (E) HT+1 [2]-11; Detect Lies (H) Per-1 [1]-10†; Housekeeping (E) IQ [1]-11; Observation (A) Per [2]-11;

Panhandling (E) IQ [1]-11; Scrounging (E) Per [1]-11; Streetwise (A) IQ+1 [4]-12; Urban Survival (A) Per [2]-11.

\* *Dabbler*: This perk gives Fast-Talk-8, Filch-7, Shadowing-8, and Stealth-8.

† Includes +1 from Sensitive.

*'Course I'm respectable. I'm old. Politicians, ugly buildings, and whores all get respectable if they last long enough.*

– Noah Cross, in *Chinatown*

# THE CYNICAL POLITICIAN

Jaded and slippery as an eel, ready to side with the powers that have the most cash, he might be corrupt, but above all, he's unwilling to displease the voters. In this incarnation, he's named Roger Harrison, but his job has to be tailored by the GM in order to adapt him to the main storyline. He might be a city alderman doing deals on the side. Or maybe he's a commissioner whose decisions will affect the plot, or a meddling district attorney who will try to hamstring the investigators. In *Fury*, he was the governor himself, much more concerned with the political consequences of his decisions than with doing the right thing. As to Harrison, here, maybe becoming governor is exactly his long-term Obsession.

He comes from an important local family whose fortunes were downsized in 1929, and he himself is no business genius. Fortunately, he's a political animal, fine-tuned for being rejected again and again. And that's what he wants.

Harrison has his own Achilles' heel, however – his Secret, which cannot be made known to the voters. He certainly makes use of his discreet, cheap car to protect that Secret. This is to be customized, too, since it might tie him in with the main plot. Alternatively, it's a sordid sex scandal or the ever-present bribery case. If the PCs obtain evidence about it, they'll have a lot of leverage over Harrison (and a moral quandary about blackmailing, naturally).

## He'll Say

"What will the people say?"

## The Iron

Guns aren't his solution, but he still owns his father's service M1911 Colt pistol.

## ROGER HARRISON

110 points

He is a well-dressed, attractive, often-smiling man in his early 40s, with light brown hair and eyes.

ST 11 [10]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 10 [0].

Damage 1d-1/1d+1; BL 24 lbs.; HP 11 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 11 [3].

Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8. 5'11"; 165 lbs.

## Social Background

TL: 6 [0].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

## Advantages

Administrative Rank 3 [15]; Appearance (Attractive) [4]; Contact (A police sergeant; Criminology-12; 9 or less; Somewhat Reliable) [1]; Contact Group (Business lobbyists; Skill-15; 9 or less; Somewhat Reliable) [10]; Favor (Patron (Party bosses); 9 or less) [2]; Reputation +1 ("Clean" politician; To most citizens; 10 or less) [1]; Smooth Operator 1 [15]; Status 2 [5]\*; Wealth (Comfortable) [10].

Perks: Deep Sleeper; Vehicle.

## Disadvantages

Addiction (Tobacco) [-5]; Obsession (GM-determined long-term goal) (12) [-10]; Secret (GM-determined situation that could lead to utter rejection) [-10]; Selfish (12) [-5].

Quirks: Hates Communists; Nervous stomach. [-2]

## Skills

Acting (A) IQ-1 [1]-12‡; Administration (A) IQ [2]-12; Area Knowledge (City) (E) IQ [1]-12; Current Affairs/TL6 (Headline News) (E) IQ [1]-12; Diplomacy (H) IQ [2]-12‡; Fast-Talk (A) IQ [1]-12‡; Finance (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Gesture (E) IQ [1]-12; Intimidation (A) Will [1]-12‡; Law (Local) (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Politics (A) IQ+2 [4]-14‡; Propaganda/TL6 (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Public Speaking (A) IQ+2 [4]-14‡; Savoir-Faire (E) IQ+1 [1]-13‡; Sex Appeal (A) HT+1 [1]-11‡‡.

\* Includes +1 from Administrative Rank.

† Includes +1 from Smooth Operator.

‡ Includes +1 from Appearance.

# THE PLUCKY YOUNG REPORTER

Meredith Sanders is young, inexperienced, and the first female reporter in town. Until now, she's worked for the women's page. But her father was the publisher's friend, and he backs her up. When the journalist who usually covers crime doesn't show up, she jumps at the chance. She's going to follow the news, wherever it'll take her, and she has her Intuition to guide her.

Meredith is still learning the ropes, however. She knows little about the bad neighborhoods, and nobody in the police. Maybe her Contacts in high society will turn out to be unexpectedly useful, if the plot steers that way. She might help the investigators, but it will be a two-way street; she needs information she can write down by the deadline. She loves taking pictures to go with her articles, and she might be present with her bulky equipment should photo evidence be critical.

It's worth noting that Meredith's male colleagues are likely to be chauvinist about her foray in "their" province, not just because she's a woman, but also because she's not jaded like them. Meredith earnestly believes in freedom of the press and in the right of the public to be informed. However, she burns with ambition and knows what will sell. Sooner or later, her Code of Honor might clash with her Obsession.

Her Vow has to do with what is published in the paper; she's perfectly able to tell a lie.

## Variants

Meredith as a male character is less interesting but probably more likely. In the late 1930s, a series of films portrayed a woman reporter on the police beat, Torchy Blane. Those were considerably lighter than true noir movies.

Given that PCs in a noir adventure are unlikely to be white knights and that Meredith is no damsel in distress, she can be a suitable romantic interest.

## She'll Say

"The public wants to know!"

## MEREDITH SANDERS

40 points

She's a plain girl in her 20s, with short brown hair. When she's not handling her camera, she's writing on her notepad.

**ST** 9 [-10]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 10 [0].  
Damage 1d-2/1d-1; BL 16 lbs.; HP 9 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 13 [5];  
FP 10 [0].  
Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8.  
5'7"; 130 lbs.

## Social Background

*TL:* 6 [0].  
*CF:* Western [0].  
*Languages:* English (Native) [0].

## Advantages

Contact Group (High Society; Skill-12; 9 or less; Somewhat Reliable) [5]; Intuition [15]; Less Sleep 1 [2]; Patron (Publisher; 6 or less) [5].

*Perks:* Convincing Nod. [1]

## Disadvantages

Code of Honor (Professional) [-5]; Curious (12) [-5]; Obsession (Become a famous reporter) (12) [-5]; Pacifism (Self-Defense Only) [-15]; Vow (Writing the truth) [-5].

*Quirks:* Attentive; Loves taking photos. [-2]

## Skills

Current Affairs/TL6 (City) (E) IQ [1]-12; Driving/TL6 (Automobile) (A) DX-1 [1]-9; Fast-Talk (A) IQ [2]-12; Literature (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Photography/TL6 (A) IQ [2]-12; Professional Skill (Journalist) (A) IQ [2]-12; Psychology (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Research/TL6 (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Savoir-Faire (E) IQ [1]-12; Writing (A) IQ [2]-12.

*Bad news sell best. 'Cause  
good news is no news.*

*— Charles Tatum,  
in Ace in the Hole*

# THE NEUTRAL GANGSTER

This is not a typical character of classic noir movies. The protagonists don't come to terms with criminals (even though Eddie Mars repeatedly tries to reach an understanding with Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*). However, movies are more akin to one-shot adventures, and there's little time or scope for neutrals. On the contrary, a noir campaign can resemble a TV series; in a continuing storyline, there may be space for such a

character. He can cross the investigators' path more than once, and, as long as their interests are not directly conflicting, he might develop some grudging respect for them.

Danny Padalino is such a gangster. He began as a muscleman and driver for his late boss, then he stepped into his shoes. He is neither a gunslinger nor a mastermind, but he's dogged, born in the family, and able to use the right amount of violence.



Now, he controls a neighborhood protection racket and other small criminal activities. Though largely independent, he's part of the local mafia. He doesn't believe in the traditional mafia myths about helping one's own community; he's just out for himself, motivated by his Jealousy. The cops have nothing on him at the moment, so they're just watching him.

He could come to see the PCs as tough, ruthless, self-made men, very much like him. He may find them to his liking for this reason (and he can rub it in if the investigators seem to disagree). He might become an Unreliable, infrequent Contact, or at least someone the heroes can deal with. He could just as easily be an Enemy if the heroes disappoint him or meddle with his business.

Danny's rival is Maya Searing's lover, Mickey (see p. 20). If the latter is involved in the main plot, Danny might help the investigators just to inconvenience his Enemy.

### Variants

Without changing the character, a curious twist would be having Danny hire the investigators.

### He'll Say

"We're not that different, me and you."

### The Iron

Danny always packs a Colt in .38 Super Auto, which he likes for the punch and the magazine size. Years ago, he personally hid a Tommy gun in a warehouse wall. He can still retrieve that if a true war breaks out; but it will have Malf. 15 because it's in poor repair.

## DANNY PADALINO

90 points

Danny is an attractive black-haired man in his 30s, with broad shoulders and a blade scar on his left hand.

**ST** 12 [20]; **DX** 12 [40]; **IQ** 11 [20]; **HT** 10 [0].

Damage 1d-1/1d+2; BL 29 lbs.; HP 12 [0]; Will 11 [0]; Per 11 [0]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.50 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 8 (Knife). 5'9"; 165 lbs.

### Social Background

*TL:* 6 [0].

*CF:* Western [0].

*Languages:* English (Native) [0].

### Advantages

Acute Vision 1 [2]; Allies (Group of 10 gangsters; Built on 25%; 12 or less) [12]; Ally (His lieutenant Vince Scuderi; Built on 50%; 12 or less) [4]; Appearance (Attractive) [4]; Patron (The *Capo*; 6 or less) [5]; Reputation +2 (Not to be messed with; To the underworld; All the time) [3].

*Perks:* One-way Fluency (Understands Italian). [1]

### Disadvantages

Addiction (Tobacco) [-5]; Duty (Mafia; 9 or less) [-5]; Enemy (Police; Watcher; 6 or less) [-2]; Enemy (Two-Fisted

Mickey's gang; Rival; 6 or less) [-5]; Jealousy [-10]; Lecherousness (12) [-15]; Social Stigma (Criminal Record) [-5].

*Quirks:* Loves cooking; Proud; Somewhat stubborn. [-3]

### Skills

Area Knowledge (City) (E) IQ [1]-11; Body Language (A) Per [2]-11; Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-13; Cooking (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Driving/TL6 (Automobile) (A) DX+1 [4]-13; Guns/TL6 (Pistol) (E) DX [1]-12; Guns/TL6 (Submachine Gun) (E) DX [1]-12; Intimidation (A) Will+1 [4]-12; Knife (E) DX [1]-12; Lockpicking/TL6 (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Merchant (A) IQ [2]-11; Savoir-Faire (Mafia) (E) [1]-11; Streetwise (A) IQ+2 [8]-13.

*Philip Marlowe:*

*Oh, Eddie, you don't have anybody watching me, do you? Tailing me in a gray Plymouth coupe, maybe?*

*Eddie Mars: No, why should I?*

*Philip Marlowe:*

*Well, I can't imagine, unless you're worried about where I am all the time.*

*Eddie Mars: I don't like you that well.*

– *The Big Sleep*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Armellini lives in Udine, Italy, with his very understanding wife, Silvia. He's not particularly qualified to write an article about the noir genre, having only seen *The Maltese Falcon* three times, like anybody else – what do you mean, you didn't? He makes a living out of foreign languages, but he loves dabbling with and studying the obscure and the uncanny – and trying to convert them into game mechanics! Apart from things he has published in Italian, he has written for *Pyramid*, and he is the author of **GURPS WWII: Grim Legions**. He is also the author or co-author (with Hans-Christian Vortisch) of several other e23 products: **GURPS WWII: Their Finest Hour**, **GURPS WWII: Doomed White Eagle**, and **GURPS WWII: Michael's Army**.

# THE GATHERING WILL

BY STEVEN MARSH

One problem with many noir-style games is the difficulty in getting the heroes to cooperate . . . or even interact. Heroes in a shadowy world are often loners, with little reason to trust their lives to others. Of course, what works great on page and screen is trickier around the gaming table, and having a reason for protagonists to gather and interact makes RPGs much easier. Here, then, is one possible solution for this challenge.

## THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

The wealthy industrialist Wilhelm Licht has minor beneficial ties to all (or almost all) the heroes in some fashion. One may have had a distinguished career for Mr. Licht in the past. Another may have been a college associate. A third may have been a friend of his son who helped the lad dispose of a *problem* after a youthful indiscretion. These ties do not need to be blatant or even known; it can be intriguing if Wilhelm indicates that they have some kind of association the PC knows nothing about. The GM can challenge the players to figure out how they tie into Licht, or he can assign such roles.

As the campaign begins, the heroes are gathered by the executor of Licht's estate. He indicates that Licht has died, and left a significant sum of money to each protagonist. At the reading of the will, the terms are made known:

Each of you [number of PCs] individuals have been left the sum of \$2,000,000 apiece, to be paid to each of you two years hence. However, this is contingent on *all* of you being alive at the end of those two years. Should any of you die in the interim, none of you shall receive any of this money, and those funds shall instead be given to my son, Ekkehard.

There is no indication why Wilhelm tied these individuals together, although research may indicate he was a gambler and dabbler in the affairs of others. If the campaign finds it

appropriate, the GM might even say that Licht's will has similar arrangements with other random groups of people. Knowing that there are six other de facto "parties" formed by the eccentric deceased may provide sufficient plot cover, as well as give the heroes with other groups to keep track of during the year.

The upshot of these terms should be obvious: It's to the group's advantage to keep each other alive . . . for at least two years.

Of course, the PC concepts should all be forged for mayhem in the intervening time; "sitting tight for two years waiting for the money" should not be an option for at least some of the heroes . . . and if one of the heroes is (say) a private eye who takes on hazardous cases, then rest of the group should take a keen interest in trying to help keep him alive.

## COMPLICATIONS

At its core, this premise is a simple – and even slightly blatant – way to assemble a group of PCs. However, this plot device can be used in a number of ways to enhance a noir campaign. Here are some suggestions for possible additions or complications to this core idea.

### *So Long as Nearly Everyone Survives . . .*

The "everyone must survive" terms of this premise might seem like they're too strict for the gaming group, so the GM could certainly tweak it – for example, "if no more than two die before the end of the second year." This would also allow for some wiggle room for a betrayal or two. However, it should not be an exercise for the heroes to treat the impromptu party as a game of *Killer*.

Or should it . . . ?

*Sam Spade: Haven't you tried to buy my loyalty with money and nothing else?*

*Brigid O'Shaughnessy: What else is there I can buy you with?*

*– The Maltese Falcon*



## The Lion Among the Sheep

The executor informs each PC individually that there is a supplemental clause: One person in the group actually has a different set of terms that he is following. He will inherit the *entire group's* money if (and only if) he is the *only one* still alive at the end of two years. Of course, the executor does not reveal which individual this is.

It is up to the GM to determine if this is in fact true, or if it's another game by the puckish Wilhelm to sow discord among the heroes. If it is true, then it can give the heroes a reason to remain active together even once one of them has died (and thus seemingly disqualified the entire group from receiving money); if one of their impromptu group is suspected, then the group might retain close ties just to watch each other's back while they try to figure out who the turncoat is.

As an evil variation, it's also possible that all of the PCs have been given this alternate inheritance scheme, although each believes he is the only one. Let the games begin . . .

## Where There's a Will . . .

Making sure the PCs are suitably constructed will go a long way toward making this premise work. Obviously, waiting out the two years shouldn't be an option (although it might be fun if the heroes *believe* they can). Nor would it work well if more than one (or maybe two) of the PCs are being actively hunted; at a certain point, an omnipresent threat of death is enough to counteract even serious greed.

The GM and players should work together to make sure that PCs created are somewhat conducive to being in a group. Their schemes or lives may not have them work with others much, but that should be less a result of deep-rooted psychoses and more a matter of lack of associative opportunity or motive.

Similarly, any secrets or inner lives of the PCs should not be immediately obvious to the other participants. It's unlikely for someone to agree to associate with a known gangster, but it's quite possible for someone to agree to *keep* helping that person even after the secret is out once he's already (unwittingly) helped keep him alive for six months . . .

## Evens/Odds

As another variant, maybe the terms change depending on who is still alive at the end of the two years. For example, in a six-person group, the following might happen.

6 people alive	Everyone gets \$2,000,000.
5 people alive	Ekkehard gets everything.
4 people alive	Everyone gets \$2,000,000 (including the deceased's heirs).
3 people alive	Ekkehard gets everything.
2 people alive	Ekkehard gets everything.
1 person alive	The survivor (alone) gets \$2,000,000.

This would change the terms of the situation depending on who's left. It's likely to be a *long* two years . . .

*I suspect no one, and I suspect everyone.*

– Mark McPherson, in *Laura*

## A Villainous Exercise

The core premise might work better if there is an element stronger than money uniting the heroes. For example, if they learn that there is someone trying to kill them . . .

The obvious choice would be Ekkehard – Wilhelm's son. He seems to stand the most to gain by the death of the heroes. However, noir tales are often twisty affairs. Maybe the unnamed executor is listed as a beneficiary should Ekkehard prove unable to collect his holdings. Maybe there is more to the story of Wilhelm's death, and the industrialist assembled the group(s) as an unwitting investigatory plan should he die. Or maybe Mr. Licht isn't dead at all . . .

If there is a conspiracy to kill the heroes, the existence of other groups with conditions similar to theirs might provide the GM with fodder to define the situation: "The group with the heiress was aboard the ship that exploded in the harbor; we might be next!"

## I Meant 200 BILLION Dollars . . .

The \$2,000,000 figure is (more or less) random; it's designed to be enough to give the protagonists a strong motivation to work together, but small enough that it's at least remotely realistic for a filthy-rich industrialist to set this up. (Plus, \$2,000,000 can go away thanks to plot contrivances if needed . . .) However, the core concept can be structured around smaller levels. At a street-level campaign, a much smaller sum – say, \$100,000 – might provide the motivation needed. Conversely, a "rich people behaving abhorrently" campaign might only perk up with another zero or three added on to the end of the value.

## Money? What Money?

There is also the matter of deciding what happens at the end of two years (especially if the PCs are successful). It could be that Wilhelm was completely legit, and the protagonists walk away with giant checks. Or maybe the \$2,000,000 promised was in assets, which have gotten much less valuable (or even nonexistent) over the past 24 months. Perhaps Mr. Licht is something of a fraud, and he *never* had that kind of money . . .

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor who lives outside of Indianapolis, Indiana, with his wife and son. For more details about him, see his Random Thought Table on pp. 36-37.

# THE HOUSE OF THE SUN

## AN EARLY NOIR DEN OF INIQUITY, INTRIGUE, AND TERRIBLE DANGER

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

*San Francisco, 1930.*

*Lieutenant Gompers was waved into the crime scene – a small, feverish tenement room in the Mission District. Most of the people he'd passed up the stairs were speaking Italian, and seemed more spooked than usual to have a corpse in their building.*

*"What we got, Charlie?" he asked, looking down at the covered body on the bloodied floor.*

*"Ignacio F. Milito," the detective on the scene, Myron Sallis, said. "Twenty-nine. Street punk with higher aspirations. Had a few run-ins with us before, mostly violent assault and helping run rackets. Also arrested a few times on suspicion of carrying at Moss Beach."*

*"Bootlegger, huh? You think one of his rivals got him? Or is this payback from his own?"*

*"Payback maybe," Myron sighed, reaching down to lift up the sheet: "But not from his own people. It's worse than that."*

*It was. Ignacio didn't have a face, anymore; it had been cleaved cleanly away, back to the ears, by what seemed a single, downward stroke of a sharp, heavy blade.*

*"Is it . . . is it **him**?" Gompers said, stepping away and fighting nausea.*

*"I think so. We did find **that** on the door."*

*Gompers turned to look at the door he'd just come through. On the inside of it, written in blood, were two symbols he'd become too aware of over the last five years: what looked like an "E" turned 90° to the left, over a box with a cross inside it.*

*"Oh, hell," the lieutenant said, crossing himself. "The Mountain Man."*

*"Which means Ignacio must have made someone over by Fillmore really unhappy," Sallis said. "What do you say we let this one alone?"*

*The lieutenant, nodded, turning to leave before he was sick. Whatever this was, Japantown had clearly taken care of it for them. For both their sakes, that's as far as it needed to go.*

In the sunny, modern city by the bay – well-recovered from the quake and conflagration of 1906 – many of its inhabitants regard Chinatown a squalid corner, filled with strange people and sinister doings. Whispers hint at drug dens and slave markets, and suspicion that the hideous tentacles of China are squirming into America's fair shores.

Such concerns may not be entirely unfounded, but a much worse danger lies a short distance Southwest, in the less-infamous Japantown.

At an upscale, well-established parlor catering to well-to-do folks with Asian tastes, a spy ring has taken root. This dangerous organization, knowing that war will soon engulf the Pacific, seeks to exert its influence upon the city. It is working to undermine Chinese influence, as well as black-mail key players within the city's government and higher classes, and keep tabs on the U.S. Armed Forces presence there. They also smuggle drugs, alcohol, and more exotic substances into America, selling them to their less morally upright countrymen and to Americans in search of something unusual and expensive.

Worse still, they have their own special guardian: a dangerous, rarely glimpsed specter of a man who brings a gruesome death to those who interfere with the group, or anger it in some way. This "Mountain Man," as he is known, has cast such a fearsome shadow as to make the Black Dragons nearly untouchable to the police and authorities. Only the bravest – or most foolhardy – of persons dare poke their noses into their business now.

For those intrepid souls who are still willing to risk the wrath of this unseen guardian, this article provides the known history of the House of the Sun, as well as its true nature, layout, and many secrets. Some possibilities for use are given, along with ideas on what the Mountain Man actually is, and how he operates.



## San Francisco Vice

From its earliest days as a stopover for people engaged in the Gold Rush, to before the earthquake of 1906 – and beyond – San Francisco has always had a reputation for being a lawless, decadent place. Crazy and sickening spectacles once raged across the Barbary Coast, before the fire, and all that the various vigilance committees and post-disaster cleanups have done is to tamp the vice down to manageable, more “genteel” levels. In the 20s and 30s, when this article is set, it’s understood that if you want something bad enough, you can find it somewhere in town.

Prostitution, in particular, is an easily obtained vice in the City by the Bay. While various reform movements constantly pressure city hall to clean up the problem, generous bribes, threats of reprisals, and their own self-interest – often followed by the threat of blackmail – keep the police and government officials from really tackling it.

There are a few tiers of service. Nasty “cribs,” with kidnapped girls hooked on drugs, cater to foreigners and lower classes. Ordinary brothels – many connected with speakeasies – remain a step up from that level of degradation. Parlors like the House of the Sun are much more genteel affairs, where upscale dining downstairs can lead to drinks and dancing upstairs, and then business on the floor above that. There are also “French restaurants” – unique to San Francisco – where truly excellent cuisine is available on the first floor, and private “dining rooms” above that conceal the establishments’ true purpose.

## RAISING THE SUN

The parlor known as the House of the Sun existed before the 1906 Earthquake, back when Japantown was a divided thing, existing both just outside the larger Chinatown and south of Market St. A fragrant flower surrounded by heaps of manure, the parlor maintained a high standard of clientele and services, compared to the other, less salubrious places nearby. It was well understood that if you had money, and wanted “decent girls” in Japantown, you went to the House of the Sun.

Its owner, Ishimaru Katsuo, was a wealthy, well-connected fellow who had come to America some time ago, perhaps in the late 1880s. Not even his fellow countrymen were certain how he’d come to be there – it was like he’d just appeared out of thin air. He was charming, well-spoken, impeccably dressed, and extremely fluent in English. He was also constantly surrounded by a small group of muscular, less charming fellows who kept him from being sullied by impertinent questions.

After years of making friends and influencing people in rarified circles, he put his plan into action in late 1896. He purchased a large but cozy building in South Market, on 6th St., and set about having it remade to his specifications. Before long, a great number of Japanese men no one had seen before were either working on the construction, or keeping the curious at a distance. All his plans and permits seemed in order, and he was happy to “explain everything” to any official *gaijin* who came to inquire. Meanwhile, onlookers local to Japantown were politely but forcefully exhorted to mind their place and business. Those who failed to obey were either stonewalled by Ishimaru San or beaten by his guards, depending on their place in the community.

The House of the Sun opened in January of 1897, and thrived at that location for the next nine years. Supposedly a gentleman’s club, it provided decent, “Oriental” liquor and food to an upscale clientele, and offered time to talk in private with pleasant, “Japanese” ladies. That the talking led to other, less upstanding things went without saying.

As with many parlors of the era, there were three floors: a saloon on the ground, serviced by a decent kitchen and festooned with Asian finery; a nest of quiet, well-appointed rooms on the second floor, where the ladies could “pleasantly converse” with men in privacy; and the guest rooms on the third floor, where the conversation could be continued.

The House of The Sun played host to many of the city’s upper crust, as well as visiting celebrities and other, well-connected individuals. However, they admitted no Asians of any kind onto the premises, and spurned all contact and ties with the rest of the Japanese community. It is said that some of Japantown’s leaders of commerce sought a meeting with Ishimaru San, to discuss certain “improprieties,” but left, terrified, before too long. What he told them remains a mystery.

## RECONSTRUCTING THE DAY

The House of the Sun was among the casualties when the 1906 Earthquake flattened and burned the Market St. Japantown. So was Ishimaru Katsuo, to hear it told; word was that he’d died trying to save the lives of his ladies, trapped upstairs by the fire. But when Japantown rose again, by the corner of Geary and Fillmore this time, the House of the Sun – now under new management – was among the earlier relocations.

The new manager, Kamamoto Shigeo, had been Ishimaru San’s “face man,” greeting especially upstanding customers when the owner had been busy or absent. He was just as charming as the previous proprietor, but not nearly as fluent in English. He was also a little less even-tempered – known to jump into physical situations and punish ill-mannered patrons himself, rather than leaving it to the guards.

The House’s new home was a three-story Italianate townhouse on the corner of Fillmore and Sutter, mostly untouched by the devastation. It was purchased in late 1906, rebuilt from the ground up, and opened in mid-1907 to much acclaim, and many cheers, from its previous clientele. No cheers, however, came from the rest of Japantown, as the new management maintained the outright chilly relationship with them.

The party continued on through the end of the Great War, but when Prohibition descended in 1919, the alcohol went away, at least for a time. The House of the Sun would eventually make it available for its clientele above the first floor, and became a little more careful who it admitted upstairs. But, thanks to the singularly lax and graft-prone nature of the city, they were always tipped off well in advance of a raid, and never suffered any legal repercussions for their unlawful businesses.

Illegal repercussions came in early 1925, when the local, Italian bootleggers realized that the House of the Sun wasn’t carrying their alcohol, apparently getting it from somewhere else.

Some of their representatives came by to try to intimidate the staff into telling them their secret. They were met with cold stares, an insistence that they couldn't speak English, and a polite but forceful invitation to leave.

The next time the gang showed up, they did so in force, and busted up the first floor badly. Kamamoto San and his guards jumped into the melee, but they were quickly outnumbered and savagely worked over with lead pipes and baseball bats. The mob soldiers then departed, making it known that only the kindness of their hearts was stopping them from setting the whole building on fire.

The damage was extensive, and so was the loss of face. The people they'd served for years were too scared to come by anymore, and the upper-crust clients they'd feted weren't eager to put the police on the bootleggers. After all, messing with them meant messing with other drinking establishments they'd frequented, to say nothing of their own, personal supplies. Plus, the smugglers weren't without their own sway downtown, as several of the rich and powerful owed them for one thing or another.

The message was clear: Kamamoto San would have to deal with this matter himself.

*You know there really aren't two sides of the tracks to San Francisco. There's only the lucky and the unlucky, those that happened to grab the right moment and those that didn't, and don't you let this Nob Hill crowd deceive you either. After all, we all started out with the same wooden washtubs.*

– Victoria Ware, in  
**Gentleman Jim**

## BURNING THE NIGHT

House of the Sun shut its doors "for redecorating." After a couple weeks, their mob attackers thought the problem had been dealt with. However, the closure was only temporary, and the House of the Sun opened again four months later. A still-charming, but much more subdued – and not quite as handsome – Kamamoto Shigeo greeted guests inside the sanctum, and ushered them into a first floor that looked exactly like the previous ones had. He also proudly resumed the sale of mysterious, Asian alcohol on the second floor.

Indeed, the only things that had changed were his guards and the upstairs girls. A complete turnover in staff had occurred, though only a few of the guests complained about it. The ladies were all much lovelier than before, and much more

talkative, too. The guards seemed tougher, and a little more blank-faced, but no one was coming to see *them*, were they?

The community leaders of Japantown, along with the House's more well-placed clients, expected the party to come to a crashing, fiery halt at any moment as soon as the bootleggers learned what had happened. However, that day did not come. What *did* happen began a wave of terror that would plague the San Franciscan authorities for some time to come.

The bootleggers who carried out the attack on the House of the Sun began to turn up dead, one after the other. They were gruesomely dispatched – their faces cleaved clean off, back to the ears. The murders always took place at night, and always when the victims were alone. They were committed in a variety of locations: private rooms at restaurants, speakeasy bathrooms, alleyways, apartments. Plenty of people were almost always nearby, but they never heard the victims scream, and never saw the actual assailant.

Two other details the police always kept from the papers: the faces were never recovered, and the murderer always left a calling card on a nearby surface, written in the blood of his victim. His signature was two symbols that, upon conferring with Orientalists, they learned meant *Yamada* – "mountain rice field." This was not so useful, however, as Yamada was a very common last name in Japan.

The investigating officers went to the House of the Sun to confront Kamamoto San and ask if he had any contact with the killer, given how his attackers were all dead now. All the parlor owner would say was that the problem was now the police's, and they would have to deal with it themselves. Something about how he smiled when he said that, before limping away, led them to suspect there was a distinct connection.

But that connection was never proven. In spite of several in-depth searches of the House of the Sun, and numerous interrogations of Kamamoto San and his staff, no further evidence ever turned up to link the murderer to them. Once they started digging into what the House was actually engaged in, certain persons high up in city hall told them to lay off the parlor and look for this "Mountain Man" somewhere else.

That was a few years ago. The House of the Sun continues to prosper, its clientele remains well-heeled and untouchable, and the Mountain Man still plies his bloody trade. These days, he seems to take more victims from Chinatown than the mob, but every so often, someone with no connections to Asia or the Mob gets quietly and efficiently defaced by the killer. Subsequent investigations often reveal that they were poking around Japantown, trying to find something out, either for someone else or themselves. Their confederates often say they knew that they had been marked by the killer, but chose to continue investigating rather than leave it alone, with sickening but predictable results.

Invariably, the House of the Sun is in the middle of things, leading to another fruitless round of interrogations and searches before city hall tells the police to back off, again. It's gotten to the point that when Yamada San strikes, the authorities would rather claim it was anything *but* his handiwork – often falsifying autopsy reports to make it look like suicide, or a shotgun to the face, instead.

Young and the zealous cops might get the feeling that there's a lot more going on under the surface of these deaths. But they're often quickly told to just leave it be if they want to keep their jobs, or their parts.

No one wants the headache – it's just Japantown.

## SECRET BLACK FIRE

There is a lot more going on under the surface, and none of it is good.

The House of the Sun is, and has always been, an outpost for right-wing Japanese organizations engaged in intelligence activities. Initially it was put into place to watch and counteract the Chinese presence in San Francisco, as well as gain leverage over local politicians and power brokers. Lately, its mission has expanded to also watch the comings and goings of U.S. Armed Forces, as well as act as a clearing house to smuggle things and people into the United States.

Ishimaru Katsuo, who founded The House of the Sun, was a member of the *Gen'yōsha*, the Black Ocean Society. Initially an organization of embittered ex-Samurai dissatisfied with the modernization of Japan, it eventually turned into a nationalist group that desired to see the country conquer the rest of Asia. In its quixotic quest for domination, it allied nobles with criminals, created spy schools, and employed terrorism and assassination to see its desires carried out.

One of the Black Ocean Society's chief enemies was the Chinese Secret Societies – the Triads. Knowing that they, and the Tongs that descended from them, could be found anywhere that the Chinese laid down roots, they decided to infiltrate San Francisco's Chinatown, using the nearby Japantown – just to the west of that enclave – as a headquarters. Ishimaru Katsuo, being the best English speaker, became their public face, and used the group's money and his gift of persuasion to ease the way of his leader and fellow spies.

Once well established as an unassuming import business, they discovered that the post-Silver Rush vigilance committees and upstanding Chinese businessmen had failed to completely eradicate the Tongs' influence. Unfortunately, after a few years of observation, they got too close, and the Tongs caught on. One night in 1895, the Chinese wreaked a quiet and bloody revenge upon the Japanese spies. Only Ishimaru San – sick with influenza, and recuperating in a rich friend's house – survived the attack.

With the death of his group, he became the leader, and quickly hit upon a better plan to observe the enemy. "Small people" – foreigners with no legal standing – could not spy on them without being dealt with, but well-connected Americans could not be touched without reprisals. All the group had to do was find out what these fortunate persons knew, and there were many, time-honored ways to get powerful men to talk.

This idea led to the creation of the House of the Sun, in the other part of Japantown – further away from Chinatown. Ishimaru San's superiors sent more money and much more physically competent spies, as well as workers and, later, women. Most of the women were not Japanese, but those

who were had been expertly trained by the Society in the subtle arts of interview and interrogation. Such women would be paired up with clients who might know more about goings-on in Chinatown than others, thus adding to the Japanese Empire's knowledge base.

For a time, the plan worked excellently. The Chinese suspected nothing, the well-connected had no idea they were being pumped for information, and the local Japanese population was too cowed to interfere. Ishimaru San fooled the leaders of Japantown into believing he was there on imperial business, and could have them and their families arrested for treason if they kept bothering him. He suspected that, in time, they might discover his ruse, but fate would soon make that a moot point.

The earthquake destroyed the House of the Sun, and rescuing his ladies from the fire disfigured Ishimaru Katsuo so badly that he could no longer fully perform his duties. Moreover, the Black Ocean Society was too busy with other projects to properly oversee the reconstruction of the parlor and its ongoing mission. That fell to a new group, an offshoot of the Black Ocean called *Kokuryūkai*: the Black Dragon Society.

Initially less criminally minded than its forebears, the Black Dragons had no problem taking over the illegal operation. They sent over more money and men. This time, the new guards were imperial soldiers, specially trained in unarmed combat, stealth, and forward observation. Part of their job would be to keep an eye on the American military's comings and goings in the Bay, with special interest in their navy.

The Black Dragons forbade Ishimaru San from taking his own life, as he had not failed in his duties, as far as they were concerned. They instead ordered him to remain as the secret head of the mission, with Kamamoto Shigeo acting as the owner. When the new building was reconstructed, several secret chambers were installed, including a warren of rooms for the secret leader to conduct the mission within.

A further addition was made to the mission: smuggling. The parlor was given a secret basement, with connections to tunnels leading east, to the docks by Rincon Hill. Small, specially modified ships would meet larger vessels out in the ocean. Then, they would return to the docks, there to lower the contraband down to those waiting by the mouth of the tunnel. This would be how the House of the Sun stayed wet during Prohibition without using the bootleggers. It would also be how numerous questionable objects, substances, treasures, and people traveled to and from Japan during this time.

After the bootleggers took their revenge on the "owner" of the House for refusing their services, the Black Dragons sent over a new group of soldiers. They also sent a particular, much-feared person to handle external security, as well as step up the campaign against San Francisco's Tongs.

*People like the exposure of wickedness . . . in high places. It gives them a sense of ultimate righteousness of the world . . . the squirming of those who are caught allows people to indulge in a certain legitimate sadism which otherwise they would feel obliged to suppress.*

*– John Kenneth Galbraith*



Yamada San remains a shadowy figure at the House of the Sun, witnessed only fleetingly, usually out of the corner of one's eye, and speaking to no one but Ishimaru San – and only in private. But while he may report to the man, Yamada San has the Black Dragons' leave to act as he sees fit to maintain the parlor's secrecy and security. This means he can kill anyone he wants to, in any way he wants to, so long as he is not caught, and the blame does not point back to the House of the Sun.

Sadly, he has been less than successful in that last bit. Ishimaru San is unable to ameliorate Yamada's zeal for slaughter, and complaints to his superiors are either being ignored or not making it to Japan. As a result, Ishimaru has had to begin using blackmail to keep certain, high-placed persons from allowing a full, potentially damaging investigation of the man's activities. He'd really hoped to avoid having to threaten his clients this early in the game, but it seems unavoidable.

The plan is to continue attracting clients who have access to local government and law enforcement, and use them to keep tabs on, harass, and crack down on Chinatown. They're also looking into attracting people in the media, in the hopes that they'll continue to whip up public disfavor toward the Chinese, making it more difficult for the Triads and Tongs to conduct their business in San Francisco. The less blood Yamada San has to shed, the better.

Meanwhile, the Black Dragons keep sending over agents, money, and other materials needed for the cause. All of this needs to be put into place as soon as possible, in preparation for a potential conflict with America. The long-term plan is to gather as much intelligence about military movements around San Francisco as possible, and to create as many networks of sympathizers and fellow travelers as they can. That way, when the shooting starts, a well-informed, genuine fifth column will be ready to move.

## INSIDE THE SUN

The parlor is set up to resemble most ill-informed Westerners' notions of what an Asian place would look like, rather than an actual Japanese establishment. This has been done both to give the clients what they expect, and have many large objects and tapestries to hide secret panels and weapons behind.

The exterior retains its Italianate lines, albeit with Japanese accents and overhangs. A sign in *kanji* over the door identifies it as the House of the Sun, but there's nothing in English, except for the street number. The door is reinforced with iron on the inside, and has a sliding panel to allow those inside to see who's knocking at the door before they let them in.

Inside the front door is a greeting room, where two large fellows scrutinize every would-be guest who hasn't been there before. If there's some question, they may call Kamamoto San in for clarification, but most of the time, they make the decision themselves. Those who pass have their coats taken into a coatroom (where four Ithica Auto & Burglar shotguns are hidden in a large, ornamental vase). They are then escorted through another strong, iron-reinforced door into the rest of the first floor. Those who fail to meet the standards are politely but firmly escorted out the side exit, and urged to not return.

Large, decorated vases, silk screens, and Western-style tables and chairs decorate the first floor, creating a sense of

cluttered elegance. A low, wooden platform in the center of the room plays host to a lovely woman dressed as a geisha, playing a variety of musical instruments. A long bar with high chairs runs the length of the first floor, but the bartender cannot sell anything stronger than tea. Ordinary folks, ladies, and first-timers without a reference stay on this floor. They are greeted in turn by Kamamoto San, who makes pleasant, if occasionally halting conversation with people to see if they're on the level. The small, extremely busy kitchen lies behind the bar, and the chefs come out to present their exquisite dishes in person.

## Below the Horizon

The basement is reached through a secret panel in the kitchen, with a sliding, heavy stove hiding its entrance. The hole in the wall leads to a rough, unlit stone staircase, which goes down at a steep angle. A guard is always at its bottom, with orders to kill anyone he cannot identify.

An entrancing, occasionally grotesque sight awaits those who make it down this far. The basement is filled with cases of Asian alcohol – mostly bottled crud, but with some nice acquisitions – and numerous, unmarked boxes. These boxes are MacGuffin heaven, and could contain anything: weapons, stolen property, object d'art, intelligence, money, exotic drugs, strange animals, or live or dead bodies.

A tunnel entrance faces east, guarded by a stout, locked iron grate. It heads for the docks at Rincon Hill, changing direction and texture every so often, and occasionally having offshoots into other areas, in and around Market. This allows the House's spies to travel unseen to certain areas, and may account for some of how Yamada San plies his bloody trade.

Directly across from the greeting room door is a staircase wrapped in silk tapestries that curves out of sight to the right. A guard stands before it at all times, only allowing persons to pass through if they're escorted by Kamamoto San himself. Two more guards stand at the top of the stairs, ready to rush down and deal with anyone who's succeeded in dashing past him. Another pair of Ithicas are hidden near them, should they need the weapons.

The floor beyond the guards is a well-appointed warren of small, cozy booths wrapped in silk, where two people might meet for tea – or something stronger – and discuss possibilities. A second bar sits in the middle of the floor, where another bartender dispenses the Asian liquor and beer the place is infamous for. Clients can sit there to wait for their dates, if they care to, or else retire to a booth if they'd rather not be seen for too long.

The women dress like geishas to impress their clientele, but are obviously not members of that rarified caste of entertainer. Only about half of the women are actually Japanese. The rest are Korean or Chinese – captured in conquered territories, sold, and sent to America – and have no idea what is actually going on. The Japanese women are all specially trained spies, well-skilled in coaxing information from even the least talkative clients, as well as hand-to-hand combat, should things get out of control. Kamamoto San takes care to place his prized clients with these ladies, knowing the women will remember everything that is said and report it back to him.

## The Mountain Man

Who, or what, is Yamada San? Depending on what kind of campaign is being run, the mysterious assassin could be almost *anything*.

Is he one of the former samurai the Black Ocean society recruited, using his martial skills to strike fear into the enemies of Japan? Is he a ninja, working for the highest bidder? Or is he a particularly vicious gangster, using his murderous skills – and magical tattoos – to get revenge on the Chinese for something?

Is he more than human? Is he a stealthy vampire, perhaps, or a cunning shapeshifter? Is he a ghost who possesses bystanders and makes them kill, or a revenant that forms a temporary body, and takes his gruesome trophies back to the spirit world? Could he be a demon of some kind, bound to serve?

Is he a pulp supervillain? Can he turn invisible, or teleport in and out of the crime scene, taking his trophies with him? Or does he possess the power to cloud the minds of men, so that no one can remember his coming and going?

Whatever he is, Yamada San is one scary individual. No one ever sees him enter a room – he just appears in a dark corner, silent and still. No one sees him leave either – they blink, and he's gone. Once he's disappeared, no one can quite describe him, except to say that he looked Japanese, dressed well, wore what looked like medicinal sunglasses, and spoke quietly.

He's only active at night, lending credence to his being supernatural. Or maybe he's sensitive to the light, which is why he wears the glasses?

Yamada San doesn't know *everything* that happens in Japantown, but he's quite aware when non-Japanese strangers come in to ask questions or make trouble. When he finds such a person, he usually tries to warn them off first. They'll feel like they're being observed, while alone, but no one will be there. He'll write his name on the wall while their backs are turned, or enter their rooms while they're asleep and re-arrange things. Their friends and loved ones may complain of feeling watched, and say that they thought they saw an Asian man lurking near their homes.

Sooner or later, if the warnings don't work, Yamada San comes to call. He prefers to attack a victim when they're alone, and can usually sense if he's being led into a trap. He strikes almost as soon as the victim sees him, wielding a long, wickedly sharp sword with expert precision. Then he writes his name on the wall, and vanishes, taking his trophy with him.

Yamada San seems immune to knives and bullets. If actually wounded, he does his best to fight to an exit, and then vanishes. If apparently killed, he vanishes as soon as no one's looking, and comes back, fully healed, not long after. Anyone who succeeded in hurting him earns a rare measure of respect from the man – such persons will still be killed, but only by a fatal impalement through the heart, leaving the body intact for burial.

The entrance to the third floor is hidden within the maze of booths, and guarded by a man hiding to the side of it. It's a small, spiral staircase leading up to a number of well-decorated, small rooms where the women sleep, and business can be conducted. The walls are thick and soundproofed, but also play host to a number of discreet passages and observation posts, allowing certain rooms to be listened in to, and certain things to be photographed.

Further back is a small nest of hidden rooms, from which the badly crippled Ishimaru San directs the House of the Sun – balancing the needs of Imperial Japan with what his guards, spies, and women can provide. Kamamoto San has a room there, too, though nowhere as nice as his superior's.

Yamada San may or may not have quarters, back there. Some guards whisper of a room full of faces and other, even more gruesome trophies, but no one ever sees it unless they get sent up to have a final conversation with Ishimaru San. Clearly, no one wants that.

### USING THE HOUSE

The era of primary interest runs from 1925, when Yamada San begins his killings, until early 1942, when the Japanese Internment shuts the House of the Sun down for good. The GM could always set a story prior to the 1906 fire, but it would be without the looming, noir menace of Yamada San.

In most stories, the House of the Sun would act as the punchline to a sick joke, with Yamada San as the rimshot. Something

strange is going on, the heroes investigate, their investigations take them to Japantown, and then the House, and then, if they're not careful, Mountain Man starts to follow them. What happens then depends on how well the investigators can escape his deadly attentions, and either bring the House down, or find some other way to solve the problem without attracting its notice any further.

The following are "MacGuffins" that a GM could build a plot-line around. How deadly they become depends on how directly – and visibly – the PCs attack the problem, and if they're dumb enough to make threats toward the staff of the House.

### Matters of Murder

The protagonists are investigating a spate of gruesome deaths, all apparently done by the "Mountain Man." The deceased could be bootleggers, nosy reporters, cops who couldn't leave well enough alone, or Chinese of one profession or another. They may have had their faces removed, or be missing their skulls above the lips, the entire right side of their torso from neck to hip, or some other, hideous removal, seemingly done with a single stroke from a very sharp blade.

Whether the heroes are police, private detectives, or merely interested dilettantes, they will get little assistance – and a lot of stonewalling – from any police they interview, or officials they question. Autopsy reports will have been faked to make the death seem like anything *but* Yamada San's handiwork, and witnesses may be pressured to change their stories. Bribes might overcome a certain amount of silence.

However, no one will be willing to testify or go on the record – they’re clearly terrified.

Examining the recent movements of the American deceased places them in or around Japantown, recently – most notably the House of the Sun. The Chinese invariably turn out to have been involved with criminal elements in Chinatown, especially the Tongs, and may have been seen coming into Japantown to cause trouble.

### *The Hidden Observers*

An interesting and troubling phenomenon has been noted: Pairs of Asian males dressed in Western clothing have been seen observing military goings-on from a distance at the Presidio, and watching the ships at the docks. If followed, or chased, they leg it toward the Market Street area, and then vanish.

These are, of course, the spies of The House, observing military movements. They use the offshoots of the basement tunnel to sneak back to their headquarters, and have many such holes to leap down if spotted. If caught, they fight to the death. If captured, they kill themselves the first chance they get rather than reveal what they know. Amazingly, none of them write anything down, apparently able to memorize a great deal of information.

### *The Strange Dream*

An unusual new drug is making the rounds among San Francisco’s jaded upper crust. It physically resembles opium in all respects, and can be used in the same ways, but where smoking opium brings a few hours’ of dreaming stupor, this drug’s effects lasts for *days*. It puts its users into a coma, during which time their minds are buffeted by surreal, often portentous dreams. Thankfully, unlike opium, it’s *not* physically addictive, though long-term users come to crave the rush of dreams it brings. Curiously, those addicted to opium have their cravings sated by use of this substance.

The drug is known as “the Living Death,” and is used in the smuggling of humans. Everyone who’s been smuggled into America through the House of the Sun – including its less-than-willing, non-Japanese ladies – were brought over through use of the drug. The staff keeps a good supply of it on hand for when they have to smuggle someone out, too.

Under orders of the Black Dragon Society, the House is selling the drug to selected clients that are either opium users, or in search of something “different.” The staff is making a point to sell it off the premises, so as to create a level of perceived distance from the House. Such meetings may be observed by a third party, and are almost always photographed by unseen hands. The thought is to get one more thing to blackmail their clients with, or at least create another level of dependency.

## **THE SETTING SUN**

Unless something is done to preserve the House of the Sun, it will most likely collapse in around itself in the wake of Pearl Harbor.

In the weeks leading up to the war, the Black Dragon society begins importing even more agents from Japan. These men and women have been trained to directly agitate against the American government, and encourage young Japanese and other, racially based organizations to do the same. They don’t know how close the attack on Pearl Harbor actually is, but the

urgency of their mission convinces Ishimaru San that the long-anticipated attack on America is imminent.

After Pearl Harbor, the House of the Sun weathers the same angry attacks as other Japantown establishments, but suffers less than most. All the same, their clientele leaves in droves, and everyone they were blackmailing starts to chafe against their chains. Yamada San has to kill a number of well-to-do folks in order to ensure their silence, bringing more scrutiny to the House than Ishimaru San prefers. Still, it can’t be helped.

Once the writing is on the wall for the Japanese Internment, most of the Japanese ladies leave for home. Kamamoto Shigeo and the soldiers stay behind, planning to go on the run and do what they can for their nation’s war efforts. Some of them will be captured by the FBI in days to come, some will be interred, and some will simply vanish.

Two days before the Internment Order, the House of the Sun inexplicably catches fire and burns to the ground. It has all the hallmarks of another attack by angry Americans, but the investigation eventually reveals that it was arson, set from within. A few bodies are discovered, including numerous partial skulls, but they are so badly burned that identification is all but impossible.

Eventually the city closes the books on the case – just another headache they don’t need from Japantown.

*The FBI today was rounding up known and suspected members of the toughest alien Japanese group in San Francisco. The raids were said to have been based on documentary evidence seized in previous raids on Japanese secret societies, that the local group was a “front” for the ruthless and dread Black Dragon Society, most nationalistic and terrorist of all Japanese secret bodies.*

– *San Francisco News,*  
March 31, 1942

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

By day an unassuming bookstore clerk, J. Edward Tremlett takes his ancient keyboard from its hiding place and unfurls his words upon the world. His bizarre lifestyle has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea and Dubai, UAE. He is a frequent contributor to *Pyramid*, has been the editor of *The Wraith Project*, and has seen print in *The End Is Nigh* and *Worlds of Cthulhu*. He’s also part of the *Echoes of Terror* anthology. Currently, he writes for Op-Ed News, and lives in Lansing, Michigan, with his wife and three cats.



# THE FEMME FATALE

BY CAL GODOT

*There was something about her eyes that made my heart stop when she looked at me. Each black iris was surrounded by a sparkling pool of hazel that glittered with flecks of gold. There was an intensity behind those eyes, a combination of fierce intelligence and on-the-edge madness that made her irresistible. I was drawn to her like a moth to the flame, and she was drawn to me like a spider to its prey. It was only a matter of time before one of us turned on the other. But what a time that would be.*

The *femme fatale* (French for “deadly woman”) is one of the most common archetypes of hardboiled crime fiction. An irresistibly attractive but dangerously duplicitous woman who leads the hero into peril, the *femme fatale* can also be found in some representation among almost every genre of literature and cinema. She is as old as Delilah, a female archetype whose characteristics resonate in the *femme fatale*, and as contemporary as Mata Hari, an historical woman who used sexual wiles to achieve her nefarious ends. She is an alluring seductress whose selfishness and greed drive her to betray someone close to her, usually a husband or lover. Her unbridled sexuality is often merely the outward expression of a heart without moral tether, a woman depraved and desperate enough to destroy the life of another, even someone loyal and devoted to her. Often, she is greedy, as Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, when she plots to murder her husband for the insurance payoff.

Psychologically, the *femme fatale* is most certainly an example of the sociopathic or narcissistic personality. She is seldom passive or the pawn of any man, though she may sometimes initially be the victim of an abusive husband (such as Cora Papadakis in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*). However, even this situation is turned to her benefit, used to lure and tempt her prey with the chance of heroic action and the promise of intimate relations.

Sexuality is the primary attribute of the *femme fatale*; for her, sex is not only a tool but a weapon. In the standard male-dominated world of noir fiction and film, where females are little more than second-class citizens, sex is often the only advantage possessed by a woman. The *femme fatale* almost always has a powerful sensuality and is most often “hotter than Georgia asphalt” (as Sailor described Lula in Barry Gifford’s excellent neo-noir *Wild at Heart*). Usually, the *femme fatale* does not aggressively pursue her victims, but instead remains aloof and intriguing, sometimes even coy to his advances. While she is always sexually desirable, she is not always sexually available. She may withhold consummation until her will

is fulfilled. The hero becomes the fly as the spider weavers her web of temptation and death.

The social skills of the *femme fatale*, including appearance and charismatic charm, are of primary importance and are usually her chief attributes. She is often beautiful, but she does not have to be: A less-than-attractive woman in certain circumstances might strike a pitiable figure to lure would-be heroes to misfortune. More than one of the desperate women in the rural noir of Jim Thompson is described by the author as plain or even ugly, simple small-town women who long for release from the drudgery of their lives and are willing to kill for the chance of freedom, or even just monetary relief from the boredom. (Thompson’s novels for the most part defy the heroic conventions of some hardboiled fiction, his protagonists more often psychopaths and sociopaths themselves, and the *femmes* in Thompson’s world often find the *hommes* more *fatale*.)

*Vivian Sternwood:*

*You go too far, Marlowe.*

*Philip Marlowe: Those are harsh words to throw at a man, especially when he’s walking out of your bedroom.*

– *The Big Sleep*

## ADVANTAGES

In *GURPS*, a classical *femme fatale* should be built with at least Charisma 2 and probably Appearance (Attractive). Sometimes those are accentuated with Fashion Sense. Most have at least a level or two of Smooth Operator. While it may seem out of character, a single level of Gizmo wouldn’t be inappropriate, as the classic *femme fatale* always seems to pull out a derringer or .38 when backed into a corner (sometimes even after being frisked).

## DISADVANTAGES

The femme fatale is commonly Callous, Selfish, and overcome by Greed; all of these most appropriately require a self-control roll of 9 or less. She is often a Bully with Bad Temper, though she can control her anger better than most with the attribute (self-control roll of 15 or less). She sometimes has Impulsiveness and is prone to any number of Compulsive Behaviors, with Compulsive Lying the most common. Alcoholism or some other Addiction are often part of the burden carried by the femme fatale. Although they are disadvantages, these traits sometimes ease her way into the world of men.

## SKILLS

Her skills focus on social activities. It is the rare femme fatale who is educated or cultured, though Dr. Elsa Schneider of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* is a famous exception to this rule. In addition to Sex Appeal and perhaps some acquaintance with Erotic Art, Acting is paramount for the femme fatale. She must be able to convince her victims of her sincerity, all the while weaving her web of deceit. Fast-Talk and Diplomacy help her out of a bind as well as when she's being otherwise persuasive. Body Language and Detect Lies give her an edge in her manipulations. Guns (Pistol) (not to mention Holdout and Filch) might be helpful if she decides to use Gizmo to have the aforementioned concealed pistol, but the Knife skill along with Fast-Draw (Knife) would also be appropriate to the archetype. More than one hero engaged in the throes of a passionate kiss has felt the cold bite of steel slip between his ribs.

## OTHER POSSIBILITIES

A psionic femme fatale would focus on Telepathy, using Emotion Sense or even Telereceive to feel out her intended victims -- and Aspect, Emotion Control, or Suggestion to get her way. One with access to magic would likely concentrate on Mind Control, though Body Control and Illusion and Creation spells have their place as well!

## GAMING THE FEMME FATALE

Given the usual cooperative teamwork of roleplaying, the femme-fatale player character will be a challenge to both player and GM. Since it's unlikely such a protagonist would lure her own party to destruction, the femme-fatale PC would most likely

utilize her wiles against the opponents of the adventurers. A complete understanding of reaction rolls is necessary to handle these interactions. *GURPS Social Engineering* is a near-essential guide to fulfilling and realistic social interactions in roleplaying (particularly Chapter 3).

Even more essential to the proper femme-fatale PC is the sociopathic cunning she displays as she tempts and lures her victims. It will be up to the player to drive the psyche of the femme fatale, deciding just how far she is willing to go to satisfy her ambitions. Most may find that roleplaying a self-destructive psychopath is not conducive to team play.

Using the femme fatale as an NPC is a much more straightforward and common proposition. In this case, the role is plotted and constrained by the GM, who decides not only the motivations but also the behavioral limits of the character. Her goal should initially align with that of the adventurers, though her obsessive self-interest and destructive capabilities ought to at least be hinted at. That she will betray the party to meet her ends should only be suspected, then later demonstrated. The numerous stories featuring femme fatale characters provide more than adequate examples.

Most important for the GM of a noir adventure is somehow distracting the players (and their investigators) from recognizing that the woman they just met at the all-night diner is portraying the role of the femme fatale. A simple way of doing this is to introduce more than one female character, giving them all the typical femme-fatale characteristics, thus distracting anyone on the lookout for the femme fatale. To further introduce tension, the woman in question could be close to the adventurers -- a former lover, a trusted secretary, a faithful sidekick -- someone who does not arouse immediate suspicion. (For two templates that could be adjusted to become femme fatales, see *The Sassy Secretary*, pp. 17-18, and *The Underestimated Dancer*, pp. 20-21.) To prolong the discovery of her misdeeds, the GM might include hints so that some other female NPC is wrongfully accused.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cal Godot is a writer, visual artist, and obsessive cineaste whose tastes run from *Godard* to *Point Break*. He toils as a scribe in the shadows of indie Hollywood, pushing TV pilots and churning out dialogue rewrites for things he's embarrassed to mention. He does not drive, drinks too much coffee, and plays *GURPS* almost every weekend. Some of his writing and other work can be seen at [calgodot.com](http://calgodot.com).

*It was going to be hard to be firm with her after a start like this, and something told me I should be. I didn't know why; I still don't. But I knew it right from the beginning. Here was a little lady who got what she wanted . . .*

*– Jim Thompson, **The Killer Inside Me***

# RANDOM THOUGHT TABLE

## A MILLION WAYS TO FAIL IN THE NAKED CITY

BY STEVEN MARSH, *PYRAMID* EDITOR

I read an article the other day (“5 Scientific Reasons Your Idea of Happiness Is Wrong” from **cracked.com**, the website that gains further sapience via the consumption of time) that made an interesting point about the nature of decisions. Scientists had noted that – after a certain point – additional options do not make us happier. This applies to big things (such as career paths and educational choices) and smaller ones (such as 134 varieties of ketchup in the grocery store . . . an example that will probably have our American readers nodding in agreement and our international readers arching their eyebrows in disbelief).

Rather, having too many possibilities available leads to increased anxiety. Some of this is obviously caused by the need to assimilate and form an opinion about all those choices. Another reason, offered by the article, stems from the fact that having additional choices means – regardless of what you picked – there are lots of other options you didn’t pick. This can lead to a “grass is greener” feeling, where the unhappy chooser comes to believe the reason he isn’t happy is because he didn’t select one of those other options; “I had lots of options, I chose one, and I’m not happy; therefore, I must’ve made the wrong choice.” Of course, from a logical perspective, this doesn’t preclude the possibility that no good options existed in that situation . . . or the notion that bad choices are everywhere.

In my mind, this tension between possibilities, the freedom to act on them, and the resultant unhappiness is often one of the primary appeal of noir.

### IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES!

Let’s say you’re a hero in a dungeon-fantasy campaign. Here, your fundamental possibilities are limited by the tone of the campaign world. Sure, you can go left or right down the newly revealed corridor, and you can decide how you want to attack the monster that’s in this new room, but your possibilities at that point limited by the scope of the world. You probably can’t:

- Blackmail the monster into leaving you alone.
- Have local laws changed to deal with the monster through jurisprudential means.
- Trick the monster’s lover into murderous jealousy toward its mate.
- Ignore the monster, realizing it’s merely symptomatic of a larger corrupt system.

While some such actions might at least be possible in a dungeon-fantasy campaign, they doesn’t make sense for the world or the style of play. This isn’t a judgment about such campaigns; as noted earlier, having unlimited possibilities doesn’t lead to increased happiness (for heroes or their players). However, the fact remains that in many campaigns, certain possibilities are off-limits just because of the nature of the setting.

In contrast, most noir campaigns are set in a modern or near-modern era, with realistic characters that can be expected to respond realistically to situations. Thus, many more possibilities are available to protagonists in a noir setting . . . which is part of the “trouble.”

### FREEDOM? IT’S OVERRATED

Let’s say you’re a hero in a WWII setting, which is attempting to replicate silver-age films about that conflict. In such a setting, the protagonists have many more *options* for what they are able to do than in a low-magic dungeon-fantasy campaign. Technology realistically expands character abilities, and the existence of realistic (human) adversaries opens up social-interaction alternatives. However, the PC’s *freedom* of action much more limited. The restrictions of being in a wartime environment places limits on the realistic utilization of many options (“Blackmail *Hitler*?! Are you out of your mind, Private?!”), as does the limits on acceptable behavior imposed by those higher up the chain of command (“Blackmail the *pope*?! Are you out of your mind, Corporal?!”).

Similarly, in a superheroic campaign that adheres even slightly to the conventions of the genre, the heroes are going to have limitations placed on them by their own codes of honor.



Such codes are rarer in a noir game, and – when they limit possibilities – are much less restrictive.

Thus in a noir game, a typical hero can choose any course of action that he thinks might work in a given situation. Of course, since the shadows tend to work against noir protagonists, that doesn't mean the freedom to act is going to provide any better outcome . . .

## DESTINATION: DISCONTENTMENT

Protagonists in a noir campaign have *access* to more options in dealing with problems, based on the era and the nature of their obstacles. And since they tend to be more morally flexible than many (including – quite probably – its players), they also have the *freedom* to employ those possible solutions. All of this adds up to our thesis statement (buried somewhere near the beginning of this column): Noir protagonists tend to be pretty darn unhappy.

This doesn't need to be the case – things work out okay for Sam Spade at the end of *The Maltese Falcon* – but if things go awry in a noir tale, the wistful undercurrent of “things could have been different if only . . .” is common.

## NOIR YOU'RE TALKING!

From a player's perspective, noir protagonists often live in the past as much as the present. Reminiscing how things have gone awry for the hero in the past can give him a stock of “if onlys” that can extend beyond those adventures at the gaming table.

As one idea, perhaps some (or all!) disadvantages of the investigator have some kind of story or juncture point, which might be simply part of his background: “Jake acquired his Code of Honor after he betrayed his last boss and things went to hell. He acquired his quirk about keeping track of the location of all cars in his periphery after the Stufman job blew up because Hess moved the car. He has a limp because he got stabbed by Alisonne after trusting her sob story.” (Of course, perhaps advantages or skills also have wistful “what went wrong” stories tied to them as well!) Of course, noir heroes should feel free to dwell on any decisions from *in-game* that didn't work out!

From the perspective of a GM who wants to play this up, it's great to make sure players understand the choices and freedom they have open to them. If the players aren't coming up with ideas, it's reasonable for them to roll to see if their heroes come up with any possibilities. The fact that an action is feasible doesn't mean it's not a terrible idea (“let's blackmail the chief of police” will probably prove problematic). However, letting the players cull out the bad ideas is part of the fun . . . which should only leave a few seemingly good ideas. Of course, the heroes can only pick one idea – and if things go wrong, the seeds have been sown for them to wistfully wonder what might have been.

One thing the GM might be tempted to do is provide clues about how those non-pursued possibilities panned out. (“This is Plot Point Radio. While police chase ruthless criminals through Cityberg Tunnel, the commissioner shared that the nearby bridge remains surprisingly unguarded . . .”) However, this technique should be used sparingly, if at all; the usefulness of sowing discontentment stems from the *unknowable* nature of our own branching timelines and paths not taken. Plus, players know on some level that the universe is often an arbitrary experience designed by the GM; having their noses rubbed into the fact that they made a bad decision (or, more correctly, a decision the GM *decided* was bad) may be poor form for the game. Of course, if the investigators try to track down information about how those other options might have turned out, feel free to come up with disappointments . . . although, even then, it might be good to vary between “disappointment because that other idea would have worked” and “disappointment because it *wouldn't*.”

Focusing on the freedom and possibilities open to a noir world can lead to morally complex choices, disillusionment, and nostalgia . . . all perfect ingredients for building your own shadow play.

## A Code of Honor in the Shadows

Many heroes in noir have their own codes of honor – similar in some ways to their superheroic counterparts. However, these codes are usually much less restrictive than their four-color compatriots (or even many action-movie codes). Noir is all about shadows, shades of gray, and border-case situations. While a superhero's code tends to be absolute (“I will do my utmost to keep human life alive, even my worst enemy's”), it's not uncommon for a noir hero to struggle with his code of honor, looking for “cheats” that allow him to steer through complicated situations. (“I swore to my father that I would never kill anyone, but that doesn't mean I need to save you from the car you totaled trying to run me over.”)

In *GURPS* terms, a Code of Honor in most noir settings tends to veer toward -5 to -10 points (at most), and might only be worth a quirk or two if less restrictive. Conversely, in more superheroic, cinematic, or “black and white” campaigns, these codes are often worth the full -15 points; see Code of Honor (Comics Code) from *GURPS Supers* (p. 31) as an example.

Genre conventions don't preclude someone in a noir world from having more restrictive disadvantages (although such a hero might have a hard time living long enough to see his convictions tested more than once). It can make a truly memorable experience to play a hero who tries to cling to an ironclad vow while the rest of the world around him tries to drag him down.

## ABOUT THE EDITOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has contributed to roleplaying game releases from Green Ronin, West End Games, White Wolf, Hogshead Publishing, and others. He has been editing *Pyramid* for over 10 years; during that time, he has won four Origins awards. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Nikola Vrtis, and their son.

# ODDS AND ENDS

## WHAT DO YOU DO WITH A SOBER BOUNCER?

by Jason Brick

You've made friends with some bouncers (pp. 12-16). What do you do with them?

- One of the protagonists finds a body in the bar's restroom – a body carrying a kilogram of uncut cocaine. Knowing neither the cops nor the local dealers will have a sense of humor about this, they have to dispose of the evidence as quickly as possible.

- A beautiful new regular with an exotic accent leaves with a new man every night. When she starts taking home locals, the security team notices those customers never come back.

- A wealthy, important, and dangerously inebriated celebrity pushes his way past the doorman. The boss says he must not be kicked out, and is absolutely not to be harmed by the staff or patrons.

- The bar where the party works changes hands, and the new owner starts to run drugs and stolen goods out of the back room. The PCs can either work against him, or get involved in the high risk and potential profit.

## EVERYONE WANTS SOMETHING

Tips for getting the noir feel in your campaign could fill a book of its own, but here are a couple of ideas to get you started.

- *Everybody talks.* It's quite common in noir for the heroes and adversaries to have an opportunity to talk to each other in a controlled environment where neither expects the other to retaliate. Clubs and bars are a common environment for these detentes, as are other highly public locales. (Meeting the criminal mastermind at a crowded baseball game can make for a tense moment . . .) *GURPS Social Engineering* can be invaluable for handling such interactions from a systematic perspective.

- *Everybody hurts.* While death and injury are common in noir, the protagonists of such tales often receive more punishment than their single-bullet associates. Deciding *how* this works for heroes can help build the world. Maybe most noir heroes are expected to have High Pain Threshold or similar advantages. Maybe they enjoy some level of plot immunity. Maybe adventures are just structured such that their enemies will never think to kill them as an immediate solution. Regardless of how you set it up, getting the heroes in a situation where they can prove their mettle by taking punishment is definitely keeping in genre.

- *Everybody dies.* The real possibility of heroes' death is part of what gives noir its edge . . . but it can be tricky to adjudicate in an unscripted story. One idea in keeping with the genre is to keep a PC alive if the current plot falls apart without him once he takes enough damage to "die." (He'll be really banged up, though . . . see above). However, as soon as the current story wraps up and/or that character is no longer needed, he will perish. This assures such heroes a dramatic death and keeps the wheels from falling off the plot because a random car crash killed the central protagonist in the first act.

## MURPHY'S RULES

BY GREG HYLAND



Got a Murphy's Rule of your own? Send it to [murphy@sjgames.com](mailto:murphy@sjgames.com)

## ABOUT *GURPS*

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of *GURPS* players. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! We can also be reached by e-mail: [info@sjgames.com](mailto:info@sjgames.com). Resources include:

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