

## Hot Dog Money

by Ben Nadler

My name is Abraham Reichelman, but in 1908 I was only a boy in knickers and everybody called me 'Abe' or 'Abey.' My father - a drunken carver of carousel horses - called me *boychik*. Back in Poland, he had carved lions of Judea and olive branches for synagogue sanctuaries, but there wasn't a market for that here in New York. He said it was this vocational fall from grace that had driven him to drink. I doubt my mother's death helped much either.

I can't say as that I minded that my father and religion had parted ways. Friends of mine were routinely dragged to synagogue and Hebrew school. The only place my father ever dragged me was to the amusement parks of Coney Island to admire his handiwork. He was quite a craftsman, I'll give him that. And free carousel rides sure beat being forced to learn prayers.

It was Luna Park that May evening, and three rides on a grand carousel with four ferocious lions my father had carved himself. Back out on Surf Avenue, my father ran into some of his buddies. They were on their way to a watering hole down on the Bowery, and he went off with them for "a quick drink." Those quick drinks of his often took a few hours. He told me to run off and amuse myself, and meet up with him later outside the bar.

This was all fine and well; most of the guys at school would've killed for the chance to run free on Coney Island at night. The only problem was that my father always took all the money we had with him to the bar and spent every penny of it there. Once you'd gotten over gawking at the parade of characters on the street (as I had at a very young age), you found that there wasn't much fun to be had without at least a few coins in your pocket. I was hungry, too (my father always forgot that boys subsist on food, not beer like did), and wished I had a nickel for a hot dog.

I walked down to the boardwalk, but the breeze off the ocean was too cold, and the ocean view bored me. So I took to wandering up and down the many walks which connected the boardwalk to the Bowery. I was half-heartedly looking around for some kids my age to pal around with, but the few I saw were either kept close by their parents, or working at some task. I found a crate of empty bottles outside of Feltman's and started smashing them against the wall. That was fun for a few minutes, but then a waiter came out and started shouting at me and I ran away. I wandered around for a little while longer, then gave up my search for excitement and decided to just head on up to the Bowery and wait for my father outside the bar.

That's where I was when the Italian-looking guy - much younger than my father, but definitely an adult - sidled up to me and said, "Hey kid, you want to make a shiny dime for yourself?"

He stumbled against the wall waiting for an answer, and for a minute I thought that he was drunk. But then I looked up at his face and saw that he was stone sober. Living with a father like mine, I knew the difference. It was a busted ankle that made him wobble, not drunkenness. This man was stone sober and dead serious.

"What do I gotta do to get it?"

“Just go in there,” he gestured to a bar a few doors down from the one in which my father was drinking, “and deliver this note to the guy sitting at the end of the bar. The well-dressed guy sitting next to the big fellow.”

“Sure thing.” I took the note from his outstretched hand.

“Just don’t tell him I gave it to you, OK? Tell him you got it from a pretty lady with orange hair.”

“Listen mister, I don’t know about all that. Delivering a note is one thing, but I don’t want to get caught up in any lying.”

“Aw, quit your jawing, kid, it’s just a gag. Here, I’ll make it an even two bits. Just get your butt in there.” He handed me the quarter right then and there, so I ran and did as I was told.

I was afraid that I wouldn’t know who to give the note to, but as soon as I saw the big guy, there was no question. I mean, this guy was BIG. Not big like a normal old big guy, but big like the strongmen up at Luna that bent iron bars around their necks. It wasn’t too hard to spot the well-dressed fellow either. Being next to the big guy didn’t hurt, but even an ignorant kid like me could recognize that there was something dapper about the way his suit jacket hung on his shoulders. I walked up to him and told him that a pretty woman with orange hair had asked me to give him this note.

I stuck around for a minute to see if I would get a tip out of it on top of the quarter. But they had already forgotten all about me as soon as I handed over the note, so I headed back outside.

I looked back at Italian and nodded, so he’d know I’d done my job. He didn’t nod back, and I saw that he was holding a pistol. I don’t know what I thought it was all about in the first place - I knew it wasn’t a gag - but at the moment, I knew for sure what it was all about.

The big guy and the well-dressed guy came out the swinging doors side by side. The well dressed guy had put his hat on before coming outside. It was a nice-looking hat. The Italian opened fire, ripping apart the big guy’s chest with a series of quick shots.

I had never seen anyone get shot before. I had never even seen a gun fired in real life. It was fantastic!

The big guy hit the ground hard. My Italian benefactor turned his gun on the well-dressed man and dropped him with one shot.

A woman with orange hair (so she did exist!) ran up the street towards the Italian, screaming and cursing, and he turned and dropped her too. He must have only wounded her though, because she kept up her screaming after she hit the street.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and for a terrifying instant thought that I was being arrested. But it was only my father, who had been looking for me frantically. He said that this wasn’t something for a kid to see.

I heard later that the man who gave me the quarter was a Lower East Side hood called Louie the Lump, and that he had managed to shoot the hat off one of the cops before they brought him in alive.

I also heard that the well-dressed man was the infamous gangster Kid Twist, and that the big man was his enforcer, The Cyclone. The woman with the orange hair was a music hall singer called Carroll Terry, and the whole incident was on her account.

I knew that I had done nothing but deliver a note, and that no one ever noticed a kid anyway. Still, I had played a role in the death of two gangsters, and I stayed inside the apartment evenings for a month or so, until the summer heat became too much and I had to go out on the boardwalk and feel the ocean breeze.

I can't say as I ever felt any guilt over my role in the killing. For my part it was strictly business. Twenty-five cents was a fair fee.

*Ben Nadler is young writer who lives in Jersey City and minds his own business. He became interested in the shooting of Max 'Kid Twist' Zerbach (not to be confused with the Murder Inc. stool pigeon, Abe 'Kid Twist' Reles), while writing for the Coney Island blog, Kinetic Carnival.*