

*He had no real excuse for being what he was— except he was born that way. And he had old-fashioned ideas derived from tales of long ago. Which had the usual effect inappropriate ideas have—*

## **ROMP / MACK REYNOLDS**

Rosy Porras shucked off his jerkin and began to shrug into the holster harness. As he settled it around his chest, he scowled at the row of sport jerkins in his closet. Styles these days weren't conducive to concealing a heavy-calibered shooter.

A bell tinkled and Rosy turned his scowl to the screen sitting next to the bed. He wasn't expecting anybody. He hesitated a moment, unbuckled the harness again and threw it into a chair, then went over and flicked the door screen switch.

It was a stranger. Young, efficient looking, his suit seeming all but a uniform, his face expressionless.

Rosy pursed his lips in surprise. Well, there was no putting it off. He reversed the switch so the other could see him as well and said, "Yeah?"

The stranger said, "Phidias Porras?"

Rosy winced at the use of his real first name. It had been some time since he had been exposed to it. He growled, "What'd you want?"

The other said, "Willard Rhuling, Category Government, Subdivision Police, Branch Distribution Services. I'd like to talk to you, Citizen."

Rosy Porras scowled at him. A DS snooper. That's all he needed right now, with the boys expecting him in a few minutes.

"About what?" Rosy said. "Listen, I'm busy."

The other looked at him patiently. "About your sources of income, Citizen."

Rosy said, "That's none of your business."

Willard Rhuling said, still patiently, "To the contrary, Citizen, it's my job."

"You got a warrant?"

Rhuling said slowly, "Do you really want me to get one, or can we sit down and just have a chat?"

"Wait a minute," Porras growled in disgust. He flicked off the screen, went over and picked up the shooter and holster. He put them in a drawer and locked it and then left the bedroom and went on through the living room to the apartment's front door. He opened it and let the DS man enter.

Willard Rhuling suddenly stepped close to him and patted him here, there—a quick frisking.

Rosy Porras stepped back in indignation. "Hey, take it easy, you flat. What kind of curd you pulling off?"

Rhuling said mildly, "I've heard you sometimes go heeled, even in this day and age, Phidias."

Porras winced again. "Listen, call me Rosy," he growled. "Everybody does." He led the way into the living room.

Willard Rhuling let his eyes go around the room and did a silent whistle of appreciation. "No wonder, in view of the fact that I can't find any record of you working since you came of age. Things are pretty rosy, aren't they? How do you manage to maintain this apartment on the credit income from the Inalienable Basic Common stock issued you at birth? Our records show you are only a Mid-Lower. Your Inalienable Basic doesn't begin to call for a place like this. This is Upper-Middle, or even Low-Upper caste, Porras."

Rosy had started toward the auto-bar, but, remembering what the evening had in prospect, changed his mind and sank down into a chair. He didn't invite the other to be seated.

He said, "A friend loans it to me."

"I see. Where is this friend?"

"He's on a vacation over in Common Europe."

"And when will he be back?"

"I don't know. It's a long vacation. Listen, what business is it of yours?"

Willard Rhuling had taken a place on a couch. He looked about the room again. "And all these rather expensive furnishings. They belong to your friend, too?"

"Some of them," Rosy said. "And some of them are mine."

Rhuling brought a notebook from an inner pocket and flicked through it. He found his page and checked it. "Phidias Porras, alias Rosy Porras," he read. "Category Food, Subdivision Baking, Branch Pretzel Bender." He frowned. "What in Zen is a pretzel bender?"

Rosy Porras flushed. "How'd know?" he growled. "I was born into my category, like everybody else. My old man was a pretzel bender and his old man, and his. But that branch got automated out a long time ago. Can I help it if there is no such work. I just live on my credits from my Inalienable Basic."

Rhuling looked at him patiently. "You drive a late model hovercar. Where did you acquire the credits for it?"

Rosy grinned at him. "I didn't." The other's eyebrows went up. "You admit it? That you got this car without credits to exchange for it?"

"I won it gambling."

"Oh, come now."

Rosy Porras, in exaggerated nonchalance, crossed one leg over the other. He said reasonably, "There's no regulation against gambling."

The other said disgustedly, "Don't be ridiculous. Gambling isn't practical on anything but a matchstick level. Of course, there's no regulation against it, but when our system of exchange is such that no one but you yourself can spend the credits you acquire as dividends on your Inalienable Basic stock, or what you earn above your basic dividends, gambling becomes nonsense."

Porras was shaking his head at him. "Now that's where you Category Government people haven't figured out this fancy system to its end. Stutes that like to gamble, like to gamble period, and they'll find a way. Sure, we can't spend each other's credits, but we can gamble for *things*. Suppose a dozen or so poker addicts form kind of a club. One of them sticks in his hovercar which he had to pony up a hundred credits for; another sticks in a diamond ring that rates fifty credits; another puts in a Tri-Di camera that set him back twenty credits. O.K., the banker issues chips for the credit value of every item the group members put up. And if any member wins enough credit chips he can 'buy' the thing he wants out of the club kitty."

Rhuling was staring at him. "I'll be damned," he said.

Rosy Porras snorted amusement. "You must be from out of town," he said. "You mean you never heard of gambling clubs?"

The other cleared his throat. He said, ruefully, "Undoubtedly, I'll be hearing more about them soon. There's no regulation against them now, but there should be."

"Why?" Porras said, letting his voice go plaintive. "Listen, why can't you DS characters leave off fouling up everybody you can?"

The other said patiently, "Because under People's Capitalism, Citizen, no one can steal, cheat or con anyone else out of his means of exchange. Or, at least, that's why my category exists. The DS is interested in how a Rosy Porras can live extremely well without having performed any useful contribution in any field for his whole adult life."

Rosy's expression made it clear he was being imposed upon. "Listen," he said. "I got a lot of friends. I haven't been too well lately, I been sick, see? O.K., so these friends of mine pick up the tab here and there."

"You mean friends have been discharging your obligations by using their credits to pay your bills?"

"There's no regulation against gifts."

"No, there isn't," Rhuling admitted, unhappily. "But discharging a grocery bill at an ultra-market isn't exactly the sort of gift one gives a man in his prime."

"No regulation against it." Rhuling said.

"And this is your sole method of income, save the dividends from your Inalienable Basic stock?"

"I didn't say that. I do a lot of people a lot of favors and then maybe they do me one. And, like I say, I belong to some of these gambling clubs."

"And always win?"

Rosy shrugged hugely. "They don't call me Rosy, for nothing. I'm pretty lucky. Listen, I got some business needs taking care of. Do you really have anything on me, or are you just wasting both our time?" Willard Rhuling came to his feet with a sigh. He looked down into his book again. "General Aptitude I.Q. 136," he read. He looked up at the other. "And here you are, a full-time bum."

Rosy stood, too, scowling. "Listen," he said, "I don't have to take that from you. You got my category. I'm a pretzel bender. What can I do? The job's been automated out of existence."

"You can always switch categories, work hard and possibly run yourself up a couple of castes."

Rosy sneered. "Sure, that's the theory. And maybe it sounds good to somebody like you. You're probably a Mid-Middle, at least. And born into your caste, you've got it made. But when you're a lower, about the only category you can switch to that you've got a chance in is Military, or Religion, and I'm not stupid enough to go into one, and not phony enough for the other."

Rhuling looked at him speculatively. "We'll see just how stupid and phony you are, Porras. I have a sneaking suspicion that you're going to wind up in a Psychotherapy Institute, Citizen."

"Yeah? Listen, my stute pal, I got a *lot* of friends, understand? You'll have a time getting *me* into a pressure cooker."

"We'll see," the DS man said grimly. He turned and started for the door. "See you later, Rosy."

Rosy Porras scowled after him. It didn't do a man any good to have the DS on his tail. He wondered uncomfortably what he had done to draw their attention. In this age, a grifter's first need was to remain inconspicuous.

Rosy Porras was already late but he was taking no chances. He drove his hovercar into the downtown area and into the heaviest of traffic and then spent the next twenty minutes doubling and doubling back still again. All he needed was for some snooper such as Rhuling to be shadowing him.

Evidently, he was clear. He finally left the car in the parking cellars of a large hotel and made his way to one of the popular auto-bars above. He found an empty booth and dialed a drink, putting his credit card on the receipt screen. This was one of the few things he had to use his own skimpy credits for. He sipped the drink slowly and checked the occupants of the other tables unobtrusively.

When he was convinced of their innocence, he let his finger thump twice on the table and Pop Rasch and Marvin Zogbaum came over and sat down with him.

Pop Rasch, a heavy-set, gray-faced man with obvious false teeth, said sourly, "Where in Zen you been? We were about to fold the whole job."

Rosy said, "A snooper from the DS police turned up and grilled me at the apartment."

Pop said, "Oh, oh."

Porras waved a hand negatively. "It was nothing. Just routine."

"How'd he know where to find you?"

"I suppose they got ways. Anyway, I guess I'd better move on. We been working this town too hard anyway. Maybe I'll go out to the West Coast."

Marvin Zogbaum, a clerkish looking type and out of setting with these two, said nervously, "Well, I suppose then we'd better call off tonight's, ah, romp."

"Romp," Rosy snorted at him. "You been watching those telly detective shows? You oughta stick to the fracasas, Marv." His tone held deprecation.

Zogbaum said defensively, "I'll watch whatever I please, Porras."

"O.K., O.K.," Pop Rasch said. "Let's not get into a silly argument. That's just what we need right in the middle of a job. What'd you say, Rosy? Should we call it all off?"

Rosy Porras grumbled. "Can't afford to now. We need a good taw, in case of emergencies."

Mary Zogbaum said, still miffed, "Maybe you do, but I *work* in my category. I've got a job and I'm clean."

Rosy snorted. "You're about as clean as a mud pack. You put in minimum time on that job of yours and live like some of these Uppers holding down premium positions on double hours. The first time the DS gets around to checking you, you're going to be doing some fast talking."

Pop Rasch said, "And all we have to do is start squabbling among ourselves and we'll all wind up in a Category Medicine Psychotherapy flat-house learning to adjust to society." He grimaced at the thought.

Rosy said, "Listen, let's get going. We've been casing this job for weeks. There's no point in panicking out now. Nothing's happened except a DS snooper named Rhuling talked to me for ten minutes."

"Rhuling!" Rasch said.

Rosy looked at him. "Somebody you know?"

"He's from Neuve Albuquerque. A real burn off stute. One of those yokes who takes his work seriously. I got a friend that ran into this Willard Rhuling."

Mary Zogbaum blinked. "What happened to him?"

"What'd ya think happened to him? He's got a silly job now stooging for some Category Research technician, or something. Why, when I see him on the street, he's hard put to remember me. Brainwashed."

Rosy Porras got to his feet and growled, "Let's get going. It's late as it is."

Mary Zogbaum brought up the rear, disgruntled, but he followed.

They took Pop Rasch's heavy sedan to the records section of the Administration Building, which they had already cased thoroughly. They parked half a block down from the side entry. Pop and Mary Zogbaum sat in the front seat, Rosy in the back.

Rosy opened the overnight bag which Rasch and Zogbaum had brought along and unfolded a long, pipelike device. He screwed an object resembling a wind instrument's mouthpiece to the end.

He said, "You're sure of these details, eh?"

"Yes, yes," Zogbaum said nervously. "He's the only one in the building at night. He sets up various routine matters for the day shift. But for all I know, he's already gone in. I think we're late. Perhaps we'd better put it off."

"Don't be a funkier," Rosy grunted.

"Here comes somebody now," Pop Rasch growled softly.

"It's him," Zogbaum whispered. "Are you sure . . ."

"Knock it," Rosy said.

The lone pedestrian passed without looking at them. When he had gone a dozen feet or so, Rosy Porras rested his pipe on the ledge of the window and puffed a heavy breath of air into the mouthpiece.

The pedestrian clapped a hand to his neck as though swatting a mosquito, and went on.

Rosy grinned. He began taking his device apart again. "There's the world for you," he told his companions. "The simpler things you use, the bigger the wrench you can throw into the most complicated machinery these double domes can dream up. A blowgun!"

Pop Rasch said, "This was your idea, Rosy. How soon will it hit him?"

"In about fifteen minutes. Then he'll go out like a light and wake up in maybe six hours with a blockbuster headache, but no memory of anything but sleeping."

"That'll give us plenty of time to finish the, uh"—Zogbaum looked at Rosy defiantly—"romp and leave the place all cleaned up so nobody'll ever know we've been there. Six hours is plenty of time."

Pop Rasch looked at him. "Why don't you take a trank," he said. "Nothing to be nervous about. All we gotta do is sit here for twenty minutes."

"I can't afford to be tranked," Zogbaum said, "and I hate to wait."

At the end of the twenty minutes they left the car and walked unhurriedly to the door of the building which the lone pedestrian had entered. The street was deserted at this time of night. Pop Rasch carried the valise.

Pop looked up and down the street as a double check, then hunkered down. The lock on the door yielded to his efforts in a matter of minutes.

Pop Rasch sighed and said, "They don't make them the way they used to. No challenge, like." He added, a note of nostalgia in his voice, "They don't even have watchmen, anymore."

Rosy Porras entered first. He looked up and down the halls. Some lights were burning. Not many. The Administration Building was inoperative at night.

"All clear," he said. "Let's go." Automatically, he shrugged his shoulders to loosen his harness and have the feel of the handgun ready to be drawn.

They proceeded down the hall. Pop Rasch had a simple chart of the building in his hand. They turned several corners, finally emerged into a long room banked with Tabulators, Collators, Sorters and Computers. Leading off it, in turn, were several rooms of punched-card files, tape files, shelves of bound reports.

"O.K.," Pop said to Mary Zogbaum. "Now you're the boss. Go to it. Just for luck, I'm going to look up that cloddy Rosy claims is going to be sleeping for the rest of the night."

"It's not necessary," Rosy growled. "He's got enough dope to keep him under."

"Just the same," Pop said, "double-checking never hurt nobody—especially since he's the only guy in the building."

Mary Zogbaum wet his lips nervously and entered the first of the file rooms, after taking up the valise. He opened the bag and brought forth a sheaf of closely typed reports.

He said importantly, "Now you two leave me alone. I have to concentrate." He fished from the valise a small manually operated card punch.

"Take it away, fella," Rosy said tolerantly. "I'm the heavy. I'll stand guard."

Pop Rasch left on his checking mission.

Rosy Porras had remained free to operate on the wrong side of a society that was supposedly crime free, only by exercising an instinct for self-preservation that had served him well on more than one occasion when he found himself in the dill.

Something didn't feel right now.

Pop Rasch, an old pro, capable of becoming bored even while on a job, had sunk into a swivel chair and had actually drifted off into a fitful sleep, snoring raspily.

Marvin Zogbaum was busy in the files, humming and sometimes whistling to himself in concentration. He'd pull a card here, another there, sometimes substituting one from the valise, sometimes punching another hole or so. On several occasions, he displaced whole boxes of tapes, or cards, and actually stored three of them away in the bag.

Rosy Porras, suddenly unhappy, left the room and retraced the route by which they'd progressed through the building.

Everything looked the same.

He returned to the door by which they had entered, and opened it a fraction to peer out along the darkened street.

There were three hovercars that hadn't been present earlier, parked out there.

He closed the door quickly. His face was expressionless. The gun slid into his hand as though wizard-commanded. He stood for a long moment in thought, then moved in quick decision.

He paralleled the wall for several hundred feet, along the semidark hallway, then stopped by a window. It took a while for his eyes to accustom themselves to the dark outside. Across the road was a small park, benches, trees, bushes, a small fountain.

There was a man quietly sitting on a bench alone. After a time Rosy Porras was able to make out two other figures standing behind tree trunks.

There was no doubt about how things stood now. The whole thing had pickled. Rosy moistened dry lips.

He hurried back to the room where Mary Zogbaum labored over the punched cards and tape files. Pop Rasch still slumbered fitfully.

Rosy fumbled through the report sheets which Zogbaum had brought with him. He kept his voice even. "You finished with this one of Dave Shriner?" he said to Mary Zogbaum. Zogbaum looked up

impatiently. "Shriner, Shriner? I don't remember them by name."

Rosy said, "Code 22D-11411-88M."

"Oh, that one. Yes," Zogbaum muttered. "All finished. Don't bother me now. I've got a dozen to go." "O.K.," Rosy said. Unobtrusively, he put the report sheet in his pocket and left the room.

He walked softly by Pop Rasch and made his way back into the corridor. He set off at a pace for the far side of the great building, making his way by instinct and quick animal reasoning rather than by knowledge of this part of the establishment.

Up one corridor and down another.

It was a matter of ditching the other two. Pop Rasch was too old to move fast enough and Zogbaum was too jittery in the dill to trust. The situation had pickled now and it was each man for himself.

He came finally to a window that opened on a dark alley-like entryway. He peered through it. Could see nothing.

He flicked the window's simple lock and drew it aside. He threw a leg over the sill and dropped to the ground below.

A voice chuckled and said, "Got you, you funkler!" Rosy Porras felt arms go around his body.

He dropped suddenly, letting his legs go from under him so that the full weight of his husky body was on the other's arms. He fell on through, his buttocks hitting the ground. Without aim, he threw a pile-driving punch upward and struck low into the other's stomach.

The voice that had chuckled but a moment ago, gave out with a deep groan of anguish. Rosy rolled quickly, came to his feet and lashed out at the other with both hands. It was too dark to strike accurately, but he could tell the other had crumpled. The gun was in his hand again and he peered down, indecisively. He had no time to make sure of the other. He spun quickly and ran for the entryway's head.

He paused a moment there and looked out. The way seemed clear. This part of the Administration Building opened onto the back of extensive offices, devoted to lower echelon workers. He holstered the gun.

Rosy Porras walked rapidly, but kept himself from a run. It was a matter now of relying on the good fortune his name promised. It was a matter of getting a hovercab before things exploded behind him.

But even as he hurried toward a more traffic ridden street, his mind was checking back, reevaluating. Whatever had gone wrong, shouldn't have. It was all but impossible. Neither Zogbaum, nor certainly Pop Rasch would have purposely betrayed them. Not any way that he could figure it.

He went back over the day. There had been nothing untoward until the appearance of the DS man, Willard Rhuling. Could he have said anything to Rhuling that had given the other a clue? No. Was there any way in which Rhuling could have tailed him? No. He had taken every precaution and then, after he had met the others, they had once again made sure they were not being followed.

He reached an entertainment area, hurried to a cab park. He began to dial the coordinates of his apartment, but then brought himself up sharp. He dialed the address of a hotel nearby instead.

He leaned back in the hovercab and forced his mind along the path of the past few days. No, there was nothing until Rhuling had shown up. His lips thinned in a grimace of rage. The cool, efficient effrontery of the DS snooper. The way he'd calmly entered the Porras apartment and then had the nerve to run his hands over Rosy's body checking for a gun. The frisking!

That was it! Rosy Porras quickly ran his hands through his pockets, the pockets Willard Rhuling had touched. He found it nestled down beneath a key ring and a cigarette lighter. A tiny device, no bigger than a shirt button.

Rosy stared at it and snarled. He threw it out into the street. A subminiature direction transmitter! Rhuling had planted it on him back there in the apartment and the DS operatives then had been able to tail him at their leisure. A trick as simple as that. Pop Rasch would have laughed him to scorn.

They probably had Pop by now, and Mary Zogbaum, too. And here he was on the run, simply because he'd been too stupid to consider the possibility of his having a bug planted on him.

He left the hovercab at the hotel near his apartment house. He walked through the lobby, passing by the auto-bar although he would have given years of his life right now for a quick double shot of guzzle.

He emerged by a side door and strolled in the direction of his apartment. He couldn't make up his mind whether or not he had the time to spend five minutes gathering up ... No, he didn't. A hovercar zoomed down before him and immediately in front of his building. Rosy Porras stepped into a doorway.

It was Rhuling, the DS operative. He vaulted from the open car and hurried toward the door.

"That's that," Rosy growled. It wasn't as though it was disastrous. Rosy Porras had decided long ago in his career that times would come when a complete abandonment of all luggage and belongings would be necessary. To the extent that you could divorce yourself from such impedimenta, you were better off. He reentered the hotel by the entry he had left it only moments before, and ordered a cab. While he waited, he went into the auto-bar and dialed a double shot.

At a phone booth, he looked up the address coordinates of David Shriner and noted them down on the report he had surreptitiously taken from Mary Zogbaum.

In the hovercab he dialed the coordinates of Shriner's apartment house and let his mind churn over half-formed plans.

The hour was getting on by the time he stood before the screen in Shriner's door. Rosy Porras snapped the fingers of his right hand in a fine case of jitters and muttered obscenities at the delay.

Shriner's plump face lit up the screen and he grinned. "Rosy!" he said. "Come on in."

Rosy Porras pushed the door and emerged into the entrada and then went on through into the ample living room. In a moment, Shriner appeared, yawning, from a bedroom. He wore a robe over pajamas. Shriner was a second-string telly actor, noted for his comedy and exuberance.

He closed the door behind him and made a gesture with his head. "Ruth's asleep," he said. "Keep it low. I thought the deal was you were never to come here."

Rosy growled something and made his way over to the auto-bar where he dialed himself a double brandy.

Shriner said excitedly, "How did it go? Everything all set?"

Rosy took his drink back to a chair and slumped into it, suddenly very weary.

"Listen, Dave," he said, "a wheel came off. We're in the dill. You've got to help me."

The other's face froze. "What ... what happened? Now look here, Rosy, I didn't commit myself to doing any more than . . ."

"Knock it," Rosy snapped. "Who'd you think you were playing with, some cloddy with a penny ante racket? I've made arrangements to put plenty of credit to your account in the past and the things you kicked back weren't as much as all that. You're in this now, if you want to be or not and the only way of helping yourself is helping me."

Shriner, a short chubby man, good living oozing from his skin, went to the auto-bar and shakily dialed himself a twin of his visitor's drink. He turned back to Rosy Porras and said, "How did the romp pickle?"

Rosy ignored the word that irritated him and summed it up briefly. "We were halfway through the job when the DS police showed up. I got away, the others were probably caught."

"What are you going to do?" the actor said, trying to keep the tremor from his voice.

"I'm going on the run to South America," Rosy told him. "I want you to get on the screen right now and order me a shuttle rocket seat to Miami and from there a flight to Sao Paulo. Then I want . . ."

The other laughed bitterly. "What am I going to use for credits? You know with"—he motioned to the bedroom door—"I spend every credit I can get my hands on." He shrugged in deprecation. "That's why I lined up with you fellows in the first place, and now look what you've done."

Rosy Porras brought the report sheet he had lifted from Zogbaum from his pocket and scowled down on it. "You've been credited with nearly ten thousand, enough for you to get by normally for three or four years. It's all been run into the credit records of this district. Mary got that far before we were interrupted."

Shriner blanched. "Then I'm really in the soup."

Rosy waved the paper at him and growled, "No, you're not. I've got this. It's the only clue they might have had. We had this worked out foolproof. They'll never detect the difference, especially when they figure they've got the whole business in their hands."

"But they've got this man of yours who was doing the altering."

Rosy shook his head angrily. "That doesn't mean a thing. Mary had a list of some twenty names. He didn't have any call to be interested in individuals, he was just altering totals by code number. He doesn't know you from Adam, and I've got the report sheet he was working from right here."

Dave Shriner finished his drink in a gulp. "And you think I'm safe?"

Rosy was lying, but the other was blinded by his need for hope.

Rosy said now, "Get the Night Expediter on the screen and go to work. Get my tickets, and then switch half those credits to your account in Brazil."

"Half?" Shriner protested. "Your cut was always one third which I paid over to you as supposed gifts or gambling winnings."

"That was before," Rosy growled. "Now I'm in the dill and need half." Dave Shriner said, his eyes narrower with greed. "It wouldn't do you any good, Rosy. You can't spend my credits. I can buy those tickets for you but once you're in Brazil you'll be on your own."

"I'm taking your identification with me," Rosy told him flatly. "I've got some friends in Miami who can alter them enough for me to get by. They don't pay much attention in a foreign country anyway, just so the international credits are on tap."

The chubby actor was staring at him. "Are you drivin'-happy? If you take my identification, what will I do?"

Rosy looked at him in disgust. "You'll go down to the Category Distribution offices tomorrow and tell them you lost them. Dream up some complicated story about falling out of your boat, and having to strip out of your clothes, or something. They'll give you a new set. You're a nardy actor, aren't you? What are you, an Upper-Middle? With a caste like that nobody'll think twice about it."

Shriner said unhappily, "Then what're you going to do in South America, Rosy?"

Rosy growled, "Keep in touch with some of the boys up here. When things cool, maybe I'll come back. Or maybe I'll just stay down there and make connections."

Shriner shook his head in sudden decision. "I won't do it. I'd be sticking my neck out. Sooner or later, there'd be a check-back and I'd be in the dill and . . ."

The heavy shooter was in Rosy Porras' right hand, held negligently, pointed at the floor between them. Rosy Porras' face was empty and cold cold.

The chubby man stared in fascination at the weapon. He had never seen one, other than the props in the telly shows, before.

Rosy said, "Listen, get on that screen, you funkier."

Dave Shriner couldn't take his eyes from the shooter. "Yeah, yeah, sure. Sure, Rosy. Don't get nervous, Rosy. You know me . . ."

"I'm not nervous," Rosy Porras said.

Rosy had an hour to kill before the shuttle rocket for Miami. He was safer here than any place else he could figure. So far as he knew, Willard Rhuling and the DS had no records of Dave Shriner, nor did either Pop Rasch or Mary Zogbaum know him. He was strictly one of Rosy's contacts.

Dave said worriedly, "Won't they think of looking for you at the shuttleports, Rosy?"

Rosy grinned at him. The worst seemed to be behind. Most problems seemed to have been solved.

He said, "That's one of the reasons I picked you, Dave. You're going to do a make-up job on me such as you've never done before. In fact, we'd better get going on that, eh?"

Dave Shriner brightened. At least it gave him something to do. He was becoming jittery sitting around with the gunman who no longer seemed to bear the old fascination, the old romantic air the portly telly actor had attributed to him. How had he ever got into this mess, anyhow? It was all Ruth's fault. Ruth with her extravagances, her constant demands.

Shriner went and got a makeup kit. For a moment, he stood back and studied the other. The face of Rosy Porras was a natural for makeup disguise. And with the use of some of Dave Shriner's wardrobe, there was no reason to believe a job couldn't be done that would pass all except a really close scrutiny.

He started to work with care. There was ample time.



As he subtly changed the seeming width of eyes, Dave Shriner cleared his throat and said, "Rosy?"  
"Yeah?"

"That shooter you carry. Have you *ever* . . . well, used it?"

Rosy Porras grinned inwardly, "Not yet," he said.

Shriner was silent for a long moment. "Rosy, what's the idea? The sort of, well, romps you do don't call for a gun. No crime today calls for shooter. It's most a matter of figuring out ways to beat the game. To scheme methods of cheating the Distribution Services."

Rosy said gently, "To tell you the truth Dave, it's a great comfort to me. A great comfort. And, how'd we know, maybe a time'll come along when I do use it. You never know, Dave."

Dave Shriner cleared his throat again and began to add wrinkles to the other's forehead.

But his natural exuberance of spirit couldn't be completely suppressed. Finally, he said, "Rosy, what's the motivation? When you add it up at the end of the year, how many more credits do you actually wind up with than, say, I do?"

Rosy growled, "Probably none. Maybe I total less. Some years, when it's bad, I don't have much more than the credits from my Basic Inalienable Common. This year's been pretty good, so far."

Shriner made a moue with his plump lips. "How can you say that? Here you are with the DS police after you."

"They haven't caught me yet," Rosy said grimly. "And things won't be bad in South America."

"But *why*? You're not unintelligent. You're not one of these cloddy lowers who sit in front of their telly sets all day, sucking on trunk and drooling as they watch the fracas fights. You could switch categories, somehow or other, and bounce yourself up a couple of castes or so. Get to be a Middle. In order to make a decent living the way you do, you must average higher in I.Q. than the usual yoke who holds down a regular job and earns credits."

Rosy thought about it.

"I don't like ruts," he grumbled finally, "and I don't like somebody telling me what I can do and what I can't. I don't like molds and sets of rules. I want my real share, what's coming to me, without a lot of curd thrown in." His voice had taken on a snarling quality.

"They think they've got it all worked out. Well, listen, there's never been a setup so smart that some stute can't beat the game. I'm doing it; I'm showing them."

Dave Shriner, his back turned as he fumbled with his jars of cosmetics, pursed his lips. This one was a real candidate for the Psychotherapy Institute. It was one thing, Shriner figured, trying to wrangle a few extra, unearned credits by this dodge or that, quite a few people he knew at least tried it. But here! Rosy Porras was really far out, and this crisis was bringing on the worst in him.

Shriner went back to the job of disguising the other, silent now.

Rosy Porras, a briefcase in hand, glasses on his nose, and a harried expression on his face, hustled across the shuttleport tarmac toward the waiting shuttle-rocket. He was a man of approximately sixty, his hair graying heavily at the temples, his jowls heavy and loose with age.

He allowed a stewardess to take his arm at the top of the ladder and to help him to his seat. He breathed heavily as though the quick walk to the craft and then the climb up the ladder had winded him.

Rosy grinned inwardly. He was getting a kick out of putting this over. Dave Shriner, the actor, would have been proud of him had he been able to see the show.

He had lied to Dave. It was going to take the DS a few days to untangle all the changes Mary Zogbaum had made in the credit files, but it was only a matter of time till they traced them all down, now that they knew what they were looking for. They'd get to Dave Shriner's account last of all, perhaps, but they'd find that, too. Rosy's chance was to get to South America by tomorrow and find some way of converting those credits into something else, before the DS got around to canceling them. He had left betrayal of Pop Rasch, Mary Zogbaum and Dave Shriner behind him, but with the old Rosy Porras good fortune, he ought to be able to make it himself.

In his seat, he peered out the porthole. They would be taking off in minutes.

Willard Rhuling sank into the seat next to him. "Hello, Rosy," he grinned. "Or would it be more

appropriate just to call you Phidias?"

For a brief second Rosy gaped at him, then his hand flicked for his left shoulder.

Rhuling's left hand, in turn, chopped out, all but breaking the other's wrist.

The DS man said grimly, "That's the little item that busted your rosy luck, Porras. We didn't have the time to organize a really all out manhunt—they're not often called for these days. But we knew you'd probably try to get out of town, and probably be disguised. There was just one thing. We knew you liked to carry that shooter, Porras, just like the big, bad men of the old days. And all we had to do was to spot metal detectors here and there in appropriate places, such as shuttle-ports. Men don't carry shooters anymore, Phidias, and yours showed up like a walrus in a goldfish bowl."

### **THAT'S THE WAY THE COOKIES CRUMBLE. . . .** *by Daniel Whitton*

On one of the recent Gemini flights, it is reported that a curious and unexpected event was observed, which has since been referred to by the scientists at NASA as the "Cookie Crumb Phenomenon." A rather fragile cookie was accidentally broken before it could be eaten, and the resulting crumbs began to drift weightlessly around in the free-fall conditions that prevailed. Gradually, however, a surprising thing happened. The crumbs slowly collected on the inside of the windows of the space capsule. This puzzled everyone for quite a while; at first, people thought it might be some sort of electrostatic attraction by the quartz windows, but then this was ruled out experimentally. Finally, some ingenious soul came up with the correct but unobvious answer, easily comprehended by anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of chemistry, physics, or even general science.

Why *do* the crumbs migrate towards the windows? For the answer, see the November issue.