

Monster Midway

a book about circus life and side-shows

by William Lindsay Gresham

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Chapter 7

The Romany Trade

“When thou wilt tell a fortune, put all thy heart into finding out what kind of a man or woman thou hast to deal with. Look keenly, fix thy glance sharply, especially if it be a girl. When she is half-frightened, she will tell you much without knowing it. When thou shalt have often done this thou wilt be able to twist many a silly girl like twine around thy fingers. Soon thy eyes will look like a snake’s and when thou art angry thou wilt look like the old devil. Half the business, my dear, is to know how to please and flatter and allure people.

When a girl has anything unusual in her face, you must tell her that it signifies extraordinary luck. If she have red or yellow hair, tell her that is a true sign that she will have much gold. When her eyebrows meet, that shows she will be united to many rich gentlemen. Tell her always, when you see a mole on her cheek or her forehead or anything, that is a sign she will become a great lady. ... Praising and petting and alluring and crying-up are half of fortunetelling. There is no girl and no man in all the Lord’s earth who is not proud and vain about something, and if you can find it out you can get their money.

This was the advice of an old gypsy woman to a young girl of the tribe, translated from the Romany more than seventy years ago by Charles Godfrey Leland, the American traveler, folklorist, and Romany rye.

The gypsies call fortunetelling *pen dukkerin*. It is the traditional trade of gypsy women the world over and throughout history. But along with it goes another art called *hokkani boro* — the great trick. A credulous patron (usually a housewife), after having her fortune told, is initiated by the gypsy into the magic of making money double itself when the proper spell is chanted over it. The money is wrapped in a handkerchief and must be “dreamed on” — placed under the pillow at night. Next morning, when the gypsy comes again, lo and behold, the sum is twice that which was tied into the handkerchief. This time the housewife takes all her savings, sometimes even borrows from relatives and neighbors, and has the gypsy tie it up and chant over it. So much money must have more time to double itself — usually three weeks, and the gypsy exacts an oath that the owner will not tamper with the bundle until the spell has had a chance to work.

The gypsy never returns and the bundle, when opened, naturally contains a roll of wrapping paper, cut into the size of dollar bills. This is *hokkani boro*, old when the pyramids were new, and still good for taking off modest scores, although it has landed more than one Romany *chi* in the *staripen* (pokey to you) and in frontier days in Tennessee, got one old gypsy woman burned at the stake for pulling this trick.

Another Romany name for this dodge is *hakk'ni panki*, from which *hanky-panky*, as a synonym for trickery of any sort, probably stems.

There is a counting rhyme among English children which goes:

*Eckery, ackery, ookery an,
Fillisy, follasy, Nicholas John ...*

which is pure Romany double-talk:

*Ekkeri, akai-ri, u kair — an.
Fillissin, follasy. Nakelas ja'n ...*

It means, literally:

*First, here, you begin.
Castle, gloves; go on, you can't play!*

The interesting thing is that this nonsense rhyme in Romany is the traditional spell uttered over the handkerchief containing the money! Children have retentive memories and a great many of them down the centuries, listening at the keyhole while the gypsy crone enchanted the cash, must have heard this time-honored formula.

A “mitt camp” is the midway term for a palmistry booth. Whether the seeress has a canvas banner showing the lines of the hand, or “mitt,” or whether the sign shows a human head with the bumps identified according to character traits for phrenology, it's a mitt camp to the carnies.

The weakness of the true Roms for *hokkani boro* has made them unpopular around carnivals of late. The *Billboard* will run ads every spring by carnival operators announcing the types of concessions they still have openings for, and among them you will often see:

“... mitt camp, no gypsies.”

That the *dukkerin* at carnivals is now conducted almost exclusively by the *gorgio* (non-gypsies) is an insult the gypsies find it hard to forgive. It is a sore subject with many of them. While visiting one of the largest amusement parks in the Middle West not long ago I saw a strikingly beautiful gypsy girl sitting at her table in the fortunetelling concession, languidly reading a tabloid newspaper. I wondered what she had to charge per reading to stay in so sumptuous a spot and asked her. The bored look left her face and she approached me with a swirl of nylon skirts and petticoats. Her eyes took on the piercing “Romany gaze” and she started her pitch, “*For one hand, one dollar, gentleman. For both hands, two dollars, giving full life reading, telling about future dangers, how to escape them, who you will fall in love with and who will fall in love with you, likewise business enemies for you to watch out for.*”

I said, “Relax, sister. I haven't got the time or the two bucks. Besides, I used to do a ‘mental act.’ I've done a lot of *dukkerin* myself.”

Her advance stopped in mid-swirl. The black eyes gave me the up-and-down with more concentrated loathing than I have ever seen issue from one human being in my life. She said, putting several thousand years' worth of contempt into her voice, “So. You *deed?*” And returned to her tabloid.

In this streamlined age (to coin a phrase) the gypsies have one disadvantage when it comes to telling the past, present and future of the American women who visit the carnival. Their art is so ancient, passed on from mother to daughter, that the clichés no longer apply in some cases: no up-to-date farmer's wife is likely to believe that she will find a treasure buried in the earth. She *will* hope to acquire a piece of antique glass at an auction which she can later sell for pots of money. The gypsies don't know about this. In short, while they know the archetypes of humanity's fears, desires and dreams, they lack the chromium polish of a really shrewd "cold reader," American style.

"Cold reading" is a trade term for a process of fortunetelling in which the customer walks in "cold" — the seeress knows nothing about her. By swift observation and deduction the fortuneteller fits her into a category unrolls a more or less formula "reading," tailored for the individual patron, and in the end gets the woman to telling her troubles, then tells them back to her as mind reading, and offers advice. Sometimes, for an extra fee, she will agree to "work on the problem" by concentration or any other form of magic she thinks the customer will go for.

Like other skeptics, I once made the mistake of underrating the cold readers. For two decades I was fascinated by the gimmicks of occult fakery, but overlooked the "readers" as nothing but slick gab artists. When I finally came to dig into their craft, I was astounded at how much applied psychology goes into the work of the top-bracket professionals, many of whom have come up from the midway. No matter how skeptical you are when faced with the crude work of a matronly tea-leaf reader or mitt-camp gypsy, I know some big-time performers who will convince anyone — even you — that they have read your mind and even plucked from it incidents which your conscious memory has dropped out of sight through the years. Yet their technique is nothing but *dukkeripen*, reinforced sometimes by a Ph.D. in psychology or half a lifetime spent in medical practice or the law.

I know three men, formerly with university posts in Europe, who fled to this country to avoid persecution by the Nazis. Unable to get jobs in American colleges, they put their hobbies to work — mnemonics, muscle reading, trick "mind reading" and hypnotism. They wear better clothes and drive better cars now than they ever did at home. And sooner or later, after every performance, they get requests from women who want their fortunes told, no matter how hard they have pounded home the fact that they are entertainers, claiming no powers to predict the future.

Many a sleight-of-hand artist has risen (or fallen) into the ranks of the "mentalists" (read: fortunetellers) simply because the average audience is in such a sweat to learn about the future that they think a demonstration of supposed telepathic powers must have accompanying abilities of clairvoyance.

Suppose you are a young magician, married, adroit, broke and discouraged. Bookings are few and far between, fees are low and the commissions of small-time booking agents are murderous. One day the agent says, "I got a spot for you, kid, Card reader at the Hotel Avalon. You work for tips, but it'll help you get your stuff out of hock; and a room goes with it — the missus won't have to bunk in with her folks no more. I know how much you can pull out of this joint, and I'm going to give you a break. Fifty a week for me and the rest is gravy." You take it.

As a magician you can talk fluently while thinking about something else and you work a little card magic on the side. All goes well. But you find that what people want is not cleverness on your part but a simple answer to their worries. This has you stumped for always before, working as a magician, you have been interested in creating illusion. Now they provide their own illusion. They want sympathetic interest in their woes and sage counsel. But you must read their minds first. If you can tell what is worrying them, they will take your advice. It's illogical, but it's human.

As a magician your first impulse is to go to a magic dealer and see what he has in the way of gimmicks. You find that he has them by the score — ways to tell what a person has written on a card or slip of

paper which never leaves his hand. You can buy a miniature walkie-talkie radio which will enable you to hear a question whispered to your wife by a spectator fifty feet away. It only costs \$400 — but you have thirty bucks between you and home relief or non-romantic toil. Besides, it is good only for an act done from a stage with an audience; in the hurly-burly of working a cocktail lounge there is no time or privacy for gimmicks.

If you are desperate enough you will buy a book on palmistry and burn the midnight oil studying it. At least, if you can remember the meanings of all the mounds and lines, you can tell 'em something and the more satisfying a reading you dish out, the bigger will be your tips and the more repeat business you'll acquire. In the end, you will probably discover for yourself, the hard way, that people fall into a few basic categories, that their lives are pretty much the same, although they all think they are different from other people, and that basically human life presents much the same problems to us all. Given this amount of savvy, and the ability to get along well with women, and you're fixed for life — as a mitt reader, card reader, head feeler, crystal-gazer or "receiver of cosmic vibrations." You have the basic formula of the "cold reading" and once you have that, plus a few years' experience, you'll never starve. Unless you are afflicted by a stern, Puritan conscience, and even then it can wear thin by the subtle abrasive effect of the credulity you will encounter. The spirit mediums, swamis, astrologers and occultist chiselers in general all fall back on the cold reading. To paraphrase an old Broadway ballad:

Some ladle out the blarney in the mitt camp of a carny,
Some lecture on the Cosmic Oversoul,
But their names would be mud, like a chump playing stud
If they lost that old ace in the hole.

I learned an important fact about fortunetelling accidentally....

There was nothing distinctive about the party except that it was held in a penthouse. The entertainment consisted of one tall, spare, soft-voiced man wearing a dinner jacket and dark circles under his eyes. He sat in an alcove behind a small table, reading palms. One by one the ladies took their places before him; he examined the lines of their hands carefully with a small lens, and then began to speak in a tone so low that the sitter leaned forward to catch his words:

"We must not think that the hand is a static, dead thing. True, its general outlines never change from the cradle to the grave, but the problems, the stresses, the hopes and fears of daily living are printed there as clearly as if your hands were the pages of a book. For instance, I can see that there is a difficulty in your life at the present time which has caused you some anxiety and worry. Something is frustrating you and while at times you seem to be making progress, there are other times when you seem to slip back; there are confusions, delays and disappointments. Now let us look at this problem in the light of what your hands tell us of your character and your past life; for the shuttle of life weaves the future on the threads of the past, isn't that so?"

At the close of the evening the ladies foregathered in the kitchen and began to take down their back hair: "My dear, he is simply marvelous! Honestly, I just sat there and never opened my mouth, and he told me things I've never confided in anybody. But anybody. He's uncanny. Of course, I don't believe in palmistry, but how did he know that George promised me a trip to Miami this winter? And how did he know that my grandmother had one of these old-fashioned phonographs with a horn and I got spanked once for trying to play it by myself and scratching the records?"

The palmist, eavesdropping in the butler's pantry whence he had gone in search of an unguarded bottle of Scotch, soaked all this in with amazement. He had talked steadily for three hours. And aside from a few details and decorations he had told every one of the ladies exactly the same thing!

That was my first introduction to the science of cold reading, for I was that palmist. The dark circles under the eyes were eye shadow, bought in the five-and-ten. I put on a little too much and it looked as if someone had hung a mouse under each eye, but it didn't seem to slow me down any. I had agreed with the hostess to play the part of psychic for her party when a professional disappointed her. I studied a ten-cent book on palmistry for a few minutes to learn the nomenclature and for the rest of the reading I took my own life and its problems, friends, enemies, hopes and despairs, and dished it out as applying to one sitter after another.

I had thought that the guests would soon realize I was pulling a gag. When I found that they took it seriously my viewpoint shifted suddenly and I found myself inside the skin of a professional psychic faker and enjoying it. For the sense of power it gives to the practitioner is enormous; the battle of glib tongue and memory against resistance and skepticism is exciting and, for a writer, what you learn about the human animal, when people open up and tell you their troubles, is all grist to the mill.

There is one cocktail-lounge mind reader and psychic who has tucked away \$200 a week minimum for the past ten years, working the same spot quietly and tactfully. His memory is a vast storehouse of faces and gossip, but his gifts as a cold reader make him outstanding. He was once a magician of great skill, but the cards and billiard balls have been laid away along with his youth and he now manipulates nothing but the human mind. He confirmed what I had found out in my first attempt at mitt reading: "You could dish out a memorized spiel and make it pay. Lots of hams do just that. But in working for real money you've got to be on your toes and take advantage of everything you can learn beforehand from waiters, doorman and other guests. Then, too, you've got to be able to size 'em up and add two and two together. See that blonde over there in the corner — tall, tanned and terrific? I just told her, '*You've been to Florida for a divorce. But you won't marry the man who paid for your trip and your divorce. You'll marry another man.*' "

"How did you ever figure that out?" I asked him, taking a covert hinge at Tall, Tanned and Terrific.

"I took a Brody on it." (Mind reader's term for taking a chance — Steve Brody took a chance when he jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge,) "To begin with, at this time of the year, lots of people go to Florida for a winter vacation, a couple of weeks. They come back looking sort of boiled. But that babe's really got her tan baked in. Nobody picks up a tan like that in a few weeks. Now, the residence requirement in Florida for a divorce is three months. That would give her plenty of time for sun bathing."

"But about the different marriage plans."

"Deduction. About four months ago that tomato was in here one night with a middle-aged character who looked well-heeled but none too smart. I happened to remember them. Now, I figured that the guy she was with that time had paid for the Florida divorce under the impression that when she got back she'd marry him. He looked too confident for a guy who was cheating on his wife on the sly; I figured he was already divorced or a widower. Anyhow, why should a babe like that one marry a *skunk* like him if she can marry a better guy? She's young yet, and knows how to use it. Give her fifteen more years — then she'll be glad to marry anything with dough that can crawl to the altar. That's when she's beginning to fade."

Very much compressed, the cold reader's breakdown of types and their problems runs something like this:

I. Young Girl

A. Wild type

1. I can't catch the man I want.
2. I can't hold him.
3. My conscience is bothering me.
4. I'm pregnant.

B. Home Girl

1. I'm afraid of men.
2. I'm afraid of life and responsibility.
3. I'm afraid of Mom.
4. Won't anything exciting ever happen?

C. Career Girl (usually jealous of a talented or successful brother)

1. (under 25) I'm ambitious; I hate and despise men and marriage. Will I be a success?
2. (over 25) I'm panicky. Will anybody ever marry me?

II. Mature Woman (30 to 50)

A. Still wild

1. Why isn't it as much fun any more? I'm lonely.
2. I'm afraid of getting my face scarred or burning to death in a fire (This never misses.)
3. I've got to believe in something — the occult, a new religion that doesn't include morals, or in you, the fortuneteller.

B. Wife and Mother

1. Is my husband seeing another woman?
2. When will he make more money?
3. I'm worried about the children.

III. Spinster

A. Still presentable

1. When will I meet *him*?

B. Given up hope.

1. My best friend has done me dirt.
2. I'm crushed — a gigolo got my savings!

IV. Young Man

A. Flashy type

1. Is there a system for beating the races?
2. What do you do when you get a girl in trouble?
 - a. Is she really pregnant or is she playing me for a sucker?

B. Good boy

1. Will I be a success?
2. How can I improve my education?
3. Should I join the Navy, Marine Corps, etc.?

4. Is my girl two-timing me?
 - a. She's mixed up with Type A.
5. I'm afraid of Mom!

V. Mature Man

A. *Wolf, married or single*

1. Girl trouble
 - a. I can't get her!!
 - b. I can't get rid of her!!
 - c. Her husband is after me with a .38,
 - d. Does my wife know?
2. Rubber-tire-around-the-middle: is there anything to this business of monkey glands or hormone shots? I'm ashamed to ask my doctor.

B. *Businessman*

1. Where's the money going to come from?
2. Will this deal work out?
3. Did I do right in *that* deal?
4. What does my wife do all day?

VI. Elderly People

A. *Woman*

1. Will my daughter get a good husband?
2. Will That Creature be a good wife to my son?
3. Will the children (or grandchildren) be all right?

B. *Man*

1. Will I ever have enough money to retire on?
2. I'm afraid to die.

C. *Both*

1. Am I going to need an operation?

VII. Wise Guy

A. *Toughie*

1. I'm here for laughs. (Ease him out quick.)

B. *Defensive bravado*

1. I'm smarter than most people: I see through you. (Flatter him; he'll end by eating out of your hand.)

This, needless to say, is not all there is to human nature, but it is all most people bring with them to the mitt camp. The cynicism of this analysis is for the cold reader's private benefit. What she actually tells the sucker is full of the milk of human kindness.

Many of the most successful "readers" have worked out: their own formula by trial and error. Others have been taught by old hands at the game, as the gypsy teaches her daughter. Still others have picked up the rudiments from mimeographed sheets published by dealers who supply the trade with crystal balls and gimmicks. But no matter how the art is learned, in practice it follows much the same routine.

There is an exploratory opening, followed by a “character analysis,” then the cold reader passes to the main subjects of human interest: love and money, health and loss, friends and enemies, dangers and dreams. A dash of mystery, a solemn warning, a piece of good advice. Then the close, designed to convince the “mark” of the reader’s wisdom and make her send her friends back to the joint.

The memorized spiel is only a springboard. The reader may fall back upon it to cover an awkward mistake, or to deal with a tough client whose face tells nothing. Usually, however, she relies on her ability to read faces and to lead the client into unconscious admissions. Both of these skills take long practice to develop, and the woman — or man — who has them is not entirely a fraud; she will know more about you in ten minutes than your husband has been able to figure out in ten years.

A seasoned carnival mitt reader, who has also worked as an “office medium” and done plenty of work in private party bookings, describes the process of milking the client for information in this way:

“Sometimes they come for a lark and you can always spot that kind. But more often, even though they’re keeping up a bold front, they are worried deep down. If you’re going to be a mitt reader you’ve got to find out what’s eating them. Take the other day, a girl about thirty-five comes in. I spotted the mark on her finger where she had taken off her wedding ring — often they’ll do that to try and fool you. I could tell she was married, all right — an unmarried woman is looking *out*, this one was looking *in*. I figured she had at least two small children — she had that hunted look. Her clothes had been good last year, but this year they’d been made over and she was no seamstress. To me, that meant less money this year than last. She had no servants — I got this from her hands. I spotted her as conservative and unimaginative, from her clothes and hair-do. And timid from the expression of her mouth and eyes. Also some anxiety and self-pity. Anxiety alone might have indicated worry over illness in the family — husband, children or herself. Anger, either on the surface or boiling underneath, would mean another woman. But anxiety and self-pity together work out as a rule to money worries.

“You can see from this how closely you can peg them before they even sit down; but you’ve got to have good eyesight and be pretty quick to observe. After all, I pay fifty a week to the carny management for this spot on the midway and when we hit the fair dates it goes up to a hundred. When you have to get up ‘the nut’ that way every week, you’ll really sharpen up your brains if you have any.

“I started off with a routine opening, rattling it out quick and in a low tone of voice so she would have to strain her ears to hear me. This keeps her from tightening up and putting on a deadpan to try and fool me, just in case she was skeptical. If a customer is using all her effort to hear what you say, she lets down her guard. I always begin, *‘My dear girl, I am glad you have taken this opportunity to consult me, for I feel that I can be of help. You understand of course that I make no claim to occult powers and do not predict the future in any way...’* This is a stall, just in case she turns out to be a cop or some kind of an investigator. Not that it worries you when you are working on a midway because the cops have been ‘seen’ already on account of the games and girl shows. And if a town is really hostile — having a shake-up in the police department or something — the word goes out and you tone down everything. It isn’t the public that want it that way, it’s the people who are going to give the public what’s good for it or bust every bone in their heads. Anyhow, I always begin with that opening because I got in the habit of doing it when I was working as an office reader — policewomen will come in, usually looking for a little shakedown money. And its against the law most places to foretell the future. The way you get around that is by what you say and the way you say it. If you’re working ‘strong’ you can say, *‘I see in the future some difficulty for you involving a short, blonde woman and a paper, printed or typewritten...’* But if you’re going easy you can say, *‘According to the impressions I receive from your mind, you have been worrying about a difficulty which is likely to occur in the future. There’s a short, blonde woman and a paper of some kind — isn’t that right?’* Then you’re covered. After all, if you see a truck rolling down a hill with no brakes you can predict a crash, right? But to get back to this girl.

“I gave her a short ‘character analysis’ and then went right after the problem that was bothering her. I said, *‘Your husband is giving you some anxiety, isn’t that so?’* I knew I’d hit because her eyes widened. Just to be on the safe side I went on, *‘There are some men who can never let a footloose woman alone...’* Now here her eyes narrowed, so I knew I was missing; it wasn’t skirt-chasing that was causing the trouble so I steered away from it: *“... but your husband is not this type. Furthermore, I see a sum of money, which must be paid. ...”*

“What I was fishing for was her response to the word *money*. If I’d missed on this one I could have slid over it. Everybody has to pay the rent or doctors’ bills or something. But I got a wide-eyed response and a little nod, so I knew I was getting warm. Now the problem was to find out the source of her money worries.

“I went on, *‘This worry about money directly concerns your husband.’* Eyes still wide — she hadn’t stolen any money, and she didn’t need it for the kids or her own family. Now the inference here was that the husband either didn’t make enough or else spent it when the family couldn’t afford it. I decided to try the first one as a starter — that he didn’t make enough. No woman thinks her husband makes enough, but she doesn’t worry about that if he squanders it, too. One worry at a time is about all the average human can stand.

“I said, *‘One of the most difficult burdens any woman can bear is to have a husband she loves who doesn’t have enough stamina to stand up for himself to his employer and demand more money when he has earned it.’* I didn’t get anything here, couldn’t tell whether I was hitting or missing so I just let it ride. *‘Then there is the type of man who has plenty of will power when it comes to working hard and demanding his rights but whose will is weak in his leisure time pursuits...’* This time I really hit her between the eyes — they got bright with the first sign of tears. Now I had to fish again.

“She didn’t look quite haggard enough to be the wife of a chronic drunk, but I threw it in anyhow: *‘A few beers or highballs can destroy all of a man’s good intentions to bring home his pay envelope untouched...’* This time I got a frown; I was stone cold. Probably her husband never touched a drop. I backtracked quickly: *‘You are fortunate that your husband is not one of those.’*

“*‘However, I seem to see a room crowded with men. Thick with tobacco smoke. Cards falling upon a table...’* Still no confirmation from her face, just hurt and bewilderment. I kept plugging away, *‘And over in a corner are a group of men with money in their hands. Something is written on a blackboard — it looks like the odds on horses in a race...’* This was it. She began to cry. I continued, *‘My dear, I get a distinct impression that this man really loves you and loves his children, yet playing the races is a vice over which he seems to have no control. Now there is no way I could possibly have known this by ordinary means, is there? You haven’t spoken a word, yet I knew.’* Well, from there on in I didn’t have to tell her anything. She told me. The poor lamb was dying to unburden herself and it came out like a flood Business was kind of slow on the midway right then — we’d just opened for the day — so I let her talk. In the end I told her to try to make her home as bright as possible, to keep her own appearance up to par and to give her husband more affection and not to nag him. When I was a social caseworker — before I got sawdust in my shoes and began working a mitt camp — I found that a lot: of men develop into horse players because it’s the only excitement they get. Of course, you can’t cure a real bad case of horse playing just by buying a sheer black nightie, but sometimes it helps. The poor guy has nothing to look forward to when he comes home and naturally he plays the races. If the wife can take care of him well between the sheets it’ll take his mind off bookie joints. If he isn’t a hopeless case.”

I was interested in finding out how much she could learn about personality just by observing people’s faces. She said, “Good heavens, there’s so much to that end of it that I could never think of all the signs. You get it by experience. But just saying what comes to mind first: a woman who is full of spite has a line at the corners of her mouth. You’d have to see it to know it. But naturally, if you’re going to make

every one of your customers a walking ad for your joint, you don't tell her she's a spiteful bitch. What you say is, *'You have suffered a great deal from the spiteful and malicious people around you. Your tendency is to be too trusting and generous.'* That's the way she sees herself. I learned that doing casework years ago: some girl gets in trouble and you go around to see her mother. The mother has all the lines of malice and greed written on her face. She opens up on the daughter, accusing her of malice and greed. It's what psychologists call the mechanism of projection and we all do it to some extent — we blame others for the faults in ourselves that we can't face.

“Now you take a man — once in a while you get men customers in a mitt camp, particularly if you have a curtain so that everybody on the midway can't see who is getting their fortune told. There's a peculiar expression around the nostrils and lips that tells you when a man has a vicious temper. You tell him *'You are naturally passionate and impetuous, easily stirred by unfairness, but the world's lack of understanding has caused you to keep yourself under rigid control.'* That's what he thinks. But watch him on the mid-way — he'll haul off and smack one of his kids just for asking for a pony ride.

“The self-righteous characters are easy to spot. They wear on their faces a curious cold smirk. You say, *'The baseness of the world was once a great shock to you, for you have a fine and sensitive nature. You have had to keep yourself aloof, to learn not to wear your heart on your sleeve.'* The thicker you slice it, the better they like it.

“There are a lot of sure-fire things that you can spring on them, either to fill in, to open them up if they're playing hard-to-get, or to cover up a bad boner you've pulled. For example: every wife, at some time or other, dreams about the great career she might have had if she hadn't married. If she is uneducated, she may resent the fact that she married instead of going on to business school — she sees herself as secretary to some big shot, the 'power behind the throne.' If she's intelligent, it was the arts. If she's stupid, it was the screen — if she's got the looks or might kid herself into thinking she had them. If she's neurotic, it was probably the theater.

“To describe a woman's friend, you describe her physical opposite. But for her worst enemy, you describe the woman herself, and she will identify someone she hates.”

Loss, I learned, is an important subject for the cold reader to touch upon, since everyone has lost something — a ring, a letter, a dog, or a husband. Everyone will react to the word. And thereby hangs a tragic tale. Most people, missing a valuable object, think at first that it is mislaid; only later do they suspect theft. Accordingly, when one woman “mind reader” who worked in theaters got the usual “Was my diamond ring lost or stolen?” she answered, *“Your first supposition was correct.”* The questioner, unfortunately, had begun by suspecting her maid; she walked out of the theater and had the girl arrested.

The maid was innocent. She was also young, sensitive, and piously brought up; and she felt the disgrace and injustice of her arrest so keenly that she hanged herself in her cell. The mind reader retired from public performances for a few years, and the town where it happened was particularly hostile to office mediums and mitt camps for several months.

In addition to the palmists of the mitt camps, carnivals also provide an outlet for the talents of “mentalists” — often in connection with a ten-in-one show. The mentalist usually pitches “astro-life-readings” — booklets which give character analyses and prophecies for persons born under the different signs of the zodiac. But he also tries to have a setup where he can give private readings. For his horoscope pitch he often has his wife circulate among the tip and let people whisper their birth dates in her ear. The mentalist, on his platform, points to one spectator after another, states his day of birth and gives him a short reading, designed to make him want more in private after the show. The dates have been coded to the professor by his wife, either by gestures or words.

A number of years ago I worked a mentalism act which I booked into clubs and anywhere I could get an audience, just for the fun of it. What I did in the act was sheer malarkey, plus some simple magic tricks in imitation of telepathy. I always began by assuring the audience that what they were about to see was “mental magic” — no more like genuine telepathy or clairvoyance than the sleight-of-hand artist’s work is genuine black magic. Yet, at the end of my show, three quarters of the audience was always convinced that I was highly telepathic and I had many requests from people who wanted private readings. These I always turned down for I am afflicted with a Puritan conscience. Also I wasn’t hungry.

But the cold readers, whether working in a permanent location with an office, or on the road with a carny, are by no means entirely crooked. Many of them are people of good will. One old girl is devoutly religious, after her fashion, and is convinced that she has a mission in life. She will tell you, if you get her complete trust: “What these poor people need is self-confidence and *belief* in themselves. If I can give them that, then the dollar or two they pay me is the greatest bargain they’ve ever had. And besides, what most of them need is just a little advice from somebody who’s been around. You’d be surprised some of the things the women tell me that they’d never tell their family doctor. And oftentimes I’m able to set them straight, just by letting them know that other people have the same problems and that they’re not liable to become social outcasts just by having these problems. Lots of people are ignorant of the most important things in life. If I can dispel their ignorance and show them that they’re using up their vital force by worrying about things that really aren’t wicked at all but natural as daybreak, then I’ve given them more than value received for their money. A lot of people know what they ought to do but can’t find the courage to do it. I give them a little push in the right direction. If the doctors and preachers of this country were doing their jobs right there’d be no need for me. And if they all get busy and do that job I’ll retire from business in a minute. I’ve got a nice little farm that I can retire to any time — got it by ‘holding the thought’ that I was going to have it, and sure enough I got it. You see, I had belief and I kept working on it. It’s that science I try to teach every single one of the folks that come to me for readings. And I try to leave them with hope. You never want to paint a dark picture of the future, always want to keep your thoughts and words positive in this world. Particularly if you’re going to succeed in my line of work. You’ll never get rich peddling gloom.”

Every now and then a carny mitt worker will find some community in which there is no competition, and which is thirsting for his talents. He will settle there, becoming the local sage, and quietly tuck away a fortune. I know of one such case which contains a heap of poetic justice. In a small town in the deep South, inhabited mostly by poverty-stricken folks of the *Tobacco Road* type, the undisputed leader of the community is not a rabble-rousing evangelist, for these come and go. He is a man known simply as the Maharajah. He is never seen on the street in broad daylight but spends his time in a closely curtained office, where his snowy turban is like a beacon in the shadows. The women of that community take him their troubles, and he provides prophecy and advice in a clipped, English voice. He has a colored housekeeper who is secretly his wife. Every bit of gossip current in that town is piped into his ears through the talk of the Negro population, relayed through her. He himself is a brown-skinned, handsome man. He got his accent by listening to the members of a fashionable club in the West Indies where he worked as a waiter in his youth. A few seasons as a carnival workman, the friendship of a mitt camp operator, and he was set for life. He is more widely read than anyone else in town, has better manners and more cash in the bank. Someday he will retire, and the town will be left without its oracle. They’ll miss him, and talk about him forever after, all unaware that their leading citizen for years was a Negro.

Glossary:

go limp — be a superb driver, and have no nerves at all, and know every trick of the trade and take no chances ...

Annex — an additional attraction of a side show or girl show for which an extra charge is made, usually a quarter.

Bally — a sample performance of a show given on a platform in front of the tent. The platform itself; the people in the sample performance.

Cake cutting — short changing.

Carny — a carnival or a carnival worker.

Cat rack — a game in which the player tries to knock dummy cats made of canvas off a fence.

Con — persuade a person to do something against his own interests after having won his confidence.

Cool out — convincing a mark that he has not been taken. The term comes from the big con games.

Cowboy — an obstreperous lout who comes on the carnival lot looking for trouble.

Front-worker — a confederate who mingles with the crowd and plays a gambling game, walking off conspicuously with a large prize or a fistful of dough. Formerly called a **shill** or a **capper**. Nowadays also called a **stick**, a term taken from gambling houses.

Gaff — also **gimmick** or “**G**”; a concealed device or secret method of operation on mechanical gambling devices.

Get up the nut — raise funds to cover the overhead and operating expenses.

Gorgio — (Romany) a non-gypsy.

Grift — dishonest practice. “That show really carries the grift” means, “That show has a lot of thieves traveling with it.”

Grind store — a game in which “everybody plays and everybody wins,” paying out small prizes. If it costs you a dime to play and the prizes cost the operator a dime a dozen he stands to make a profit automatically.

Hell driver — an auto daredevil. The term was apparently first used by Lucky Teter.

High pitch — to deliver the sales talk and demonstration from behind a high counter or on a platform.

Hoop-la — a game in which the player tosses embroidery hoops over blocks.

Inside talker — a lecturer and master of ceremonies, such as they are, in a side show.

Junker — an old car which an auto daredevil rolls over, jumps to land on its nose or otherwise demolishes.

Mark — a sucker; victim of a confidence man or swindler.

Mitt camp — the fortunetelling concession at a carnival.

Opening — the speech made outside a side show to attract customers.

Outside talker — the man who “handles the front” of a show, and makes the openings for the bally.

Pitch (verb) — to sell an article on the street or from the platform of a side show.

Prat in — pickpocket term; “to prat the mark in” means to jostle him into a favorable position by backing into him.

Running “strong” — a game that is run with the gaff in, that is, secretly controlled in favor of the operator.

Slum — cheap little knickknacks given away as prizes by a grind store or as minor prizes by other types of games.

Stick — confederate of a gambling joint operator who plays as one of the crowd.

Still date — a carnival engagement in a town under the auspices of a fraternal or veterans’ organization which furnishes the lot and sometimes the electricity in return for a percentage of the gate, usually 10 per cent.

Throwaway — when a game operator lets a member of the crowd win a large prize to stimulate business.

Tip — a crowd of customers gathered before the bally platform by the outside talker when he starts his “opening.”

Turn the tip — persuade some of the crowd to buy tickets and come inside.

