

Just Half Smart by Verne Athanas

A Hunch About This Business

The light panel delivery job was a smart piece of work. It wasn't new enough to be noticeable, nor was it shabby. It showed signs of use, and it was lettered with a business-like and ambiguous company name. Eureka Distributing Company. It came wheeling out of an alleyway between two dark warehouses, running without lights, and Johnny Packer had to climb a curb to avoid a crash. Then he caught the tinny clamor of an alarm ringing inside one of the warehouses. The panel was nearly to the corner, doing maybe forty-five per, and picking up speed.

"Well," said Johnny softly, "what do you know when he reefed the coupe off the curb and tramped down on the accelerator. This could be the break he needed. Because, of all the lunatic coincidences, this was Johnny's assignment of the moment. For thirty days he had been battering his stubborn head against this business of the warehouse thieves. He was a good cop, Johnny Packer. He came from the wrong side of town, to begin with, and he came up the hard way. He pounded a beat, and he drove a patrol car. He worked hard, and he got a few breaks, and he made the plainclothes division. He was a good cop, and the worst part of the job was the all-too-many times he had to bring in one of the boys he'd grown up with, over on the wrong side of town

The panel job took the next corner on screeching rubber, and by the time Johnny had the coupe around it, he could see that the panel truck had lights now. Smart again. Even on this quiet street at this time of night, a car without lights would be noticed.

Three blocks straight ahead the panel went, and then made a tight, noisy left turn. Johnny followed, wincing a little at the squeal of his tires. The panel was really rolling now, and had gained nearly half a block on him. They'd spotted his lights, obviously, for they wheeled into the next turn without the least slackening.

"Well, all right," he said to himself, and clamped his stubborn jaw as he juggled the wheel into the tight turn. He'd had a hunch about this business — well, maybe not so much a hunch as a shrewd bit of reasoning. This would be Squeaky Antle's type racket. He knew Squeaky from way back, from the time they'd grown up and fought together back in the old neighborhood. Squeaky was always the smart guy. Shooting the angles, playing the wise money. Smart enough to have done pretty well if he'd wanted to play it legit; half smart, Johnny always figured, because Squeaky wanted no part of the legit. That was for the suckers. Of course, it made a good front, which was why Squeaky owned a piece of a crummy amusement park with his brother-in-law.

There'd been the little touches. Warehouse watchmen were conveniently absent, or asleep, when a job was pulled. Alarms failed to work. One watchman who went to the lavatory found himself locked in, without seeing who did it, and it was half an hour before he thought about shooting the lock out.

Little touches like this panel truck now, with its innocuous lettering and its air of respectable usage.

Johnny Packer made no attempt to keep his distance now that he was sure that they knew he was tailing them. He tooled the coupe with the touch he'd learned on the patrol car. There are ways of pinching off a car, if your nerve and skill holds. At fifty miles per, it takes nerve, too.

At that, he was almost suckered. The tail light on the panel flared up as the driver hit the brakes, and the nose slewed for a narrow alleyway.

Johnny wasn't ready. He knew in that split second he couldn't possibly make it, and he growled deep in his throat and yanked the wheel over, hard. He stabbed the brakes as he reefed the wheel, and he threw the coupe into a deliberate, fast broadside. He threw himself sidelong on the seat at the last possible instant, and then they hit, in a jarring crash of smashing fenders. That hurt. This was his private car, and a plainclothesman's pay won't buy many fenders.

Then he clawed open the door and hit the pavement, crouching low as he came around the turtleback of the coupe. "All right," he said sharply, and he brought the Police Positive .38 out from under his arm. "Hold it right there!"

The Shoot Out

A black little .32 made a loud, unpleasant crash almost in his face, and he hit the ground rolling. The flash was blinding, and little flaring saucers dotted his vision. But he'd filled his hunch. That was Squeaky Antle's face behind the gun. Johnny's own shot tore the night apart as he rolled, and he heard the spiteful slap the lead made on the door of the panel. Then he heard the pound of feet in the alleyway. He rolled on to the nose of the panel, got his knees under him and fired again. He got a short frightened yell and a crash as one of them went down. Then the man screamed and screamed and screamed. Johnny said sharply around the radiator of the panel, "Throw the rod away."

"I dropped it," the man howled. "Geez, I'm hit! I'm hit bad! I quit — don't shoot no more!" Johnny risked the flashlight then, holding it at full arm's length. His man was down, and one leg was spreading a puddle below the knee. His gun was lying three feet away.

Johnny kicked the gun back toward the panel and took a quick look around. Then he dragged the man a couple of feet and cuffed one arm to a barred basement window. He cursed the time it took, for the running sound of Squeaky's feet was only a faint murmur at the far end of the alley.

"You'll be all right," he retorted shortly to his man's protesting squealing. "There'll be someone to check on this shooting in a few minutes."

He took the alleyway at a driving run, the urgency of finishing this tingling inside him. He knew Squeaky. Let him get clear, even for an hour, and he'd have an iron-clad alibi. He'd make a point of meeting Johnny later. And he'd grin, that tough wise grin of his, and maybe he'd put into words what his mocking eyes were saying.

"Dumb flatfoot. Half smart, you call me." And then he'd laugh. "What does that make you, flatfoot? I suckered you and where does that leave you?"

He came to the end of the alley, and he deliberately let his feet slap hard on the asphalt. He slid to a stop just at the angle of the wall that marked the corner.

Instantly the .32 lashed out from the side. The bullet spat brick dust from the wall, and then took up a high scream as it somersaulted out over the rooftops. Johnny let loose a return shot and heard his own bullet smack deep into the bricks across the way. Then he could hear Squeaky's scuffling flight again.

He turned the corner, crouching, and he took perhaps half a dozen running steps. Then the .32 blinked brightly at him again, and something took him by the arm and flung him against the wall. He leaned there, numb and vaguely sick, and suddenly very, very tired. Then the pain came, and it woke him up, sharp and demanding.

"Bull-headed," some said of Johnny; and "Tough flatfoot," said some. Stubborn, he was, and a good cop, and now he shook his head and set his square chin, and again he pounded after Squeaky. He knew where Squeaky was heading now. It was only a block to Squeaky's amusement park, and Squeaky could melt into a dozen hiding places there. A few minutes would be enough. By then he'd have ditched the gun, have a drink or two under his belt, and be sitting in a friendly poker game — where he'd been for hours. With witnesses. Johnny lengthened his stride.

There was a gate, and then a flimsy door. The whole place was dark. Johnny tested the door and then lunged into it with his right shoulder. Something gave, and he crashed through. Dark. Black as pitch. Black as hell. And quiet. The loose flooring sighed gently under his feet, and it was the only sound in the building. But Squeaky was there. Somehow, he knew that Squeaky was there, and so was his flat little .32, and it was a damned uncomfortable sensation.

He stood stock still for a moment, his ears alert to catch the faintest of sounds, but nothing came. He sidled up the hall, keeping close to the wall, but even here the boards whispered and sighed under his feet. Another door, and a sudden turn to the wall, and he stopped and cocked his head again. He thought of the flashlight in his hip pocket, but his right hand was filled with the Police Positive, and his whole left arm was a great jumping toothache. He felt a little budding of sweat on his forehead. Squeaky was in here.

A Distorted Reflection

Suddenly, blindingly, light burst all around him. Not ten feet away, facing him, was a ten-foot giant, a grotesque figure with a barrel chest and pipe-stem legs and an ape's face, pointing a gun the size of a jug at him. He almost fired, before he saw what it was. It was his own reflection in a distorted mirror. They were all about him, making crazy senseless angles of the room. At the same instant, he heard the door click shut — a chilly sound, like the click of handcuffs, or the clack of a sprung trap.

He swung around quickly. Nothing but more mirrors. No sense, no sane regularity to anything. Just his own reflection, peering at him from a dozen crazy angles, twisted, nightmarish. There was no door, any more. Then he heard Squeaky's voice. Like the mirrors, it was unreal, distorted by the hidden microphone that fed the speaker somewhere over head.

"All right," Squeaky said, and some of the gasping from his hard run came through.

"All right, you dumb flatfoot. You're smart, you think. Well you're not. You're dumb — and you're dead, you dumb, lard-headed flattie!"

His voice took on a pointed jeering.

"Come and get me, flatfoot! I'm right over here. No, wrong way, copper!" The speaker made flat jarring little sounds of laughter.

"I can see you, Johnny Packer. And I'm going to kill you. But you don't know from where. Front, back, side — you don't know where I am, do you, flatfoot?"

Again he laughed his jarring little laugh.

Johnny turned slowly on his heel, the .38 ready in his right hand. And, the sweat popped afresh on his forehead. There was nothing. Just himself. Fat, over yonder, not over four feet tall, and nearly as wide. Tall again, there, but with legs that slanted to the side. Clubfooted, here, with shoulders resting on his hips and a neck three feet long, and a wide silly smile. In the corner, a nightmare version of the tailor's pier-glass. In the center, himself, stocky, solid, crouching a little, with a bloody sleeve and a bulldog set to his jaw. To the left, a scrawny beanpole caricature, and on the right, a squat disdainful dwarf. His eyes caught there, and then he made them go on, and he made a slow turn on his heels, and he let his lips sag away from his teeth for a few seconds. "Better give up, Squeaky," he said aloud, and even to himself his voice was dull and hopeless. Squeaky laughed.

"Sweat, damn you!" he rasped savagely. "It won't be for long."

"There'll be cops here in a minute," retorted Johnny desperately.

"You won't tell 'em nothing, flatfoot."

Easy, said Johnny Packer to himself. Relax. Keep him talking. Don't look too long at any one spot. Keep moving. He suddenly felt a crawling spot between his shoulder blades.

Squeaky's voice was tightening. He was screwing himself up to killing pitch, and it showed in his voice.

"All right, flatfoot," came his rasp, "get ready to take it!"

The slick metallic sound of the safety catch being clicked off came over the speaker.

Johnny croaked wordlessly, and backed up, letting the panic show on his face, and his eyes rolled wildly from side to side. Then quite suddenly, he swung the Police Positive in a short, quarter-arc and pumped his last three shots into the corner where the three mirrors angled together.

The speaker squawked hoarsely, and then set up a penetrating buzz. Glass jingled musically to the floor, and then Squeaky Antle came through, rolling forward as he hunched his shoulders and hugged both arms to his belly. He crashed down amid the mirror fragments, and kicked twice. Then he was dead.

Johnny Packer told it to his chief, in his verbal report:

"Like I always claimed, Squeaky was only half smart. He had me sewed up in a sack, and ready to dump, but he had to brag a little. I figured he had to be behind a two-way mirror. You know, one of those trick things you can see through from the back, while the guy in front only sees his reflection."

The chief nodded.

"Well, I had time to take a good gander. I turned clear around, and I looked at every mirror in the room. That one in the corner was the only one that didn't make a monkey out of me. In it, I looked natural. So that's the one I shot up. A little rough on Squeaky."

"Johnny," said the chief, "you're a good cop."

"Just half smart," said Johnny modestly.