

# One Big Score

By Chuck Hustmyre

Even he had to be careful, the French Quarter was rough at night. An easy place to get taken. He walked down Bourbon Street, looking around, looking for a score, looking for anyone who might mistake him for a score.

Thousands of people were out on the street, most of them looking to get drunk and have a good time. They walked around in a fog, not seeing the danger signs. The Quarter was a bad place.

Everybody had to watch out. Thinking he was kind of like being a small shark in the ocean. He'd never actually seen the ocean but he'd seen a shark once at the Aquarium of the Americas, down at the foot of Canal Street. Way he had it figured, the little sharks had to look out for big sharks, even while they were hunting for their supper.

He was glad he decided to go with short sleeves. Even in October the Quarter was hot and muggy. This city never really

had a fall or winter. Just a couple of cold fronts, any other time was like summer.

He passed a couple of shoeshine boys on the sidewalk. Young hustlers--they spent more time trying to trick tourists out of a couple bucks than they did shining shoes. "I bet you two bucks I can tell you where you got your shoes," they'd say. Dumb out-of-towners would take them up on the bet. "You got 'em on Bourbon Street," the kid would say. Either the tourist would laugh at the joke and pay up or the kid would start making a scene. Intimidate the guy. In that case, the tourist would pay just to shut the him up.

He passed a boy and a girl sucking face in a darkened doorway, tongues halfway down each other's throat, hands groping. The guy was all sloppy, probably drunk enough, but looked in shape. Strong guy with a load on might put up a fight. He had to find the weak ones. Find 'em alone, in the dark.

Too bad he didn't have a piece. It would make things a lot easier. He used to have a piece, a nice .38, the kind with the short barrel. Cops took that, though. D.A. let him plead to simple robbery; he did forty-eight months in Angola. Never, ever, would he go back there. They'd have to kill him first.

He hadn't had enough money to get a decent piece since he came home. The paper bag trick was all right. You put your

hand in the bag and pointed it at them. If you said you had a gun and if you picked your targets right, they'd fall for it and give it up.

That was the real trick, picking your targets. The Quarter was full of people, he just had to narrow it down to one. One score a night was all he ever did. He knew guys who kept going back for seconds, even thirds. Some guys just did it all night. Not him. That was just asking for trouble. In and out, that's the way he did it.

Bourbon Street was a good place to find a score but not the place to make your move. Too many citizens and way too many cops. Had to find a lone drunk. Maybe a guy with a girl. Sometimes that was dangerous. The guy might not want to look like a wimp in front of his girl. Better to pick someone who was alone.

Follow him around a little, see if he turns off Bourbon and heads toward the river. Most of the tourists parked down by the river. The best street to make your move was either Conti or Saint Louis. You let the mark get about a block off Bourbon, where it was good and dark, then BAM! Take what they got, then run down Royal or Chartres toward Canal Street. Get lost in all the foot traffic.

The dude on the corner looked good. Standing a block away, at Bourbon and Saint Peter. Dressed casual, but expensive.

Mid-forties, carrying a leather briefcase. With the big "to-go" cup in his other hand, he had to have just come out of Pat O's.

A tourist, businessman variety. Those were good. Usually had cash and lots of credit cards. He didn't use the cards himself, but he could sell them to an A-rab he knew who ran a store on Canal Street. The A-rab paid twenty bucks a card, then sent his runners out to buy a bunch of stuff before the guy even had a chance to report the card stolen. The runners bought mostly small TV's, VCR's, and cameras, then the A-rab would sell the stuff in his store.

The guy with the briefcase wasn't tough looking at all, kind of soft and pudgy--an easy score. The guy took a long sip of his drink through a straw then started strolling down Bourbon towards Orleans Avenue. He was headed the wrong way, toward the gay section, away from Canal Street. Maybe he was a fruit? It didn't matter much.

Twice before he'd snagged a briefcase. Both times the guy had a big wallet inside, the kind with lots of little pockets for credit cards. If the guy had four or five cards, he could be sitting with a hundred bucks in his pocket in a half hour.

Picking up his pace a little, he closed the gap between him and the guy to about half a block. The guy seemed to know where he was going; he had to be a fruit. If he got down as far as Dumaine or Saint Philip it wouldn't matter if he turned off

Bourbon or not. The street was dark down there. Nothing but fruits and dykes. They wouldn't interfere.

The guy crossed Orleans Avenue and would be at Saint Ann in just a minute, it was a short block. He'd make his move just past Dumaine. As he passed a big chunk of broken brick lying on the sidewalk, he got an idea. He scooped up the brick and threw down his paper bag.

The guy crossed Saint Ann so he picked up his pace, closing in. Within a quarter block when he passed a couple of boys sitting on a stoop smoking weed. They didn't even look up at him. The dummy he was following still hadn't looked behind him. With hardly anyone out on the street, things were looking good.

At Dumaine the guy looked over his shoulder. Damn! Now he knew he was being followed. He must be getting nervous, thinking he's gonna get robbed. Probably cussing himself for walking down a dark street. All the lights and tourists were behind.

The guy made a right on Dumaine and was out of sight, heading toward the river. Bad move, it was even more lonely down there. He jogged to the corner, stopped and peeked around. The guy was there, walking fast, trying to get back to civilization. No one else in sight.

He hefted the half brick in his hand. This wasn't how he usually did it but this guy had asked for it. What else could

he do? He stepped around the corner and started running. The guy must have heard him; he looked over his shoulder again and started running.

Legs pumping, trying to chase the guy down, he started worrying the guy was going to get away. His lungs were beginning to burn; he coughed, then spit out a ball of phlegm. Two packs a day for the last twelve years, he wasn't used to running.

Just past Royal Street, he was only ten feet behind the guy but couldn't close the gap. "Stop running!" he gasped. "Stop right now and I won't hurt you." The man didn't say anything, just kept going, briefcase tucked tightly under his arm.

At Chartres Street he was three feet behind the guy and knew he was about out of gas. He was desperate. He raised the brick and lunged forward, smashing it against the back of the guy's head. The guy screamed and dropped.

He tried to stop but he was moving too fast. He tripped over the guy, dropped the brick and skidded face down along the street.

On all fours he scrambled after the brick, got his hand on it and sprang to his feet. The guy was still on the ground, screaming, both hands clutching the briefcase. He kicked the guy a few times, then circled him, trying to get close enough to hit him in the head again with the brick.

The guy kept moving, kicking his feet, trying to fight him off. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. You hit someone in the head with a brick, even half a brick, and he was supposed to be dead, or at least knocked out. Not rolling around on the ground screaming and kicking at you.

After a couple of tries he got in and smacked the guy a good shot on the forehead. It opened up a gash, blood started pouring out. Whack! Another hit and the guy went limp. Either dead or unconscious.

Voices up the street. He looked back toward Bourbon. Two people. He couldn't tell if they were guys or girls. In this neighborhood it didn't really matter.

He tucked the briefcase under one arm and felt the guy's pockets with his other hand. No wallet, that was good, maybe it meant the guy had one of those big wallets inside the case. Something in the right front pocket. He reached in and pulled out some folded bills. A twenty on top, maybe eight or ten other bills beneath it. Not much, but some drinking money and enough to score a couple bags of dope.

The two down the street were getting braver, easing this way. He stuffed the bills in his pocket then ran up Chartres toward the Saint Louis Cathedral. He made the next left at Saint Ann onto the pedestrian-only alley then slowed to a walk. Get away then slow down, don't attract attention.

The briefcase was heavy. It had two latches, both with combinations. He felt pretty good, the score hadn't been that hard even though the guy was a pain in the ass.

He stepped into an alley that smelled like garbage and piss. Holding the handle, he slammed the briefcase against a brick wall a couple of times. If he could pop it open he wouldn't have to carry the damn thing around, but it didn't open. A couple smacks on the ground, still nothing. No problem, he'd find a screwdriver and pry it open.

Leaving the alley he got back on Saint Ann. A block later he took a right on Decatur. There was a lot of traffic on the street and on the sidewalks. He mixed in easily and strolled along, enjoying himself. It was still early and it was going to be a good night.

Four blocks up, at the corner of Conti, he stepped inside the River Rat. No tourists here, strictly locals. Even local citizens didn't come here, nothing but street people--hustlers like him. There was a long bar on the left and an open area to the right was with a few small tables and an old jukebox. Straight back were the bathrooms. Maybe ten people in the place, most of them he recognized.

The River Rat was where he spent most of his time, pursuing his two favorite hobbies: drinking beer and snorting heroin. There was always somebody around he could score a bag of dope

from. Trouble was, he usually didn't have the money. Tonight was going to be different, he could feel it.

He took a seat on a stool and put the briefcase down on the bar in front of him. Bobby the bartender was a one-legged dude who hobbled around with a crutch under his left arm. He took his time coming over but eventually got around to it. "Whaddya want?"

"Beer."

"I figured that, what kind?"

Bobby always was a dick. Must be 'cause he had to limp around with one leg all the time. Nobody seemed to know how he lost his leg, but the word was that he was connected to the mob some kind of way. That's probably why nobody jumped over the bar and beat his ass. "Gimmie a Bud."

"You got any money?"

The man was a smart-ass, somebody should give him a smack. Instead he pulled the bills out of his pocket, peeled off the top twenty and laid it on the bar.

Bobby pointed. "What's up with the briefcase?"

Oh yeah, now Bobby wanted to make small talk. He thumbed through the rest of the bills. Four twenties, a ten and some ones. Over a hundred bucks total. Tonight was going to be a really good night. "I found it over by Pirate's Alley."

"Found it, huh?" Bobby hobbled away to get his beer.

He looked at the briefcase more closely. It wasn't leather, it was alligator hide, tanned a dark brown. Under the handle was a gold plate with the engraved initials, "VHM." Maybe that was the guy he clobbered. Who cares?

Bobby came back with a draft and set it down in front of him. "Any jewelry, especially watches, I can take it off your hands."

Bobby trying to get in on what he's got. Yeah, well, to hell with him. Bobby didn't pay shit. Screw Bobby and his connections. No need to piss him off right away, though.

"We'll see. Gimme a screwdriver to pop these latches."

Bobby shuffled off again.

He took a couple of long sips of his beer and looked around the room. Nobody in right now he could score from. He looked at his watch, only ten o'clock, still early. It wouldn't be long, a couple dealers would show up and this time he had cash. He hoped there'd be something good inside the briefcase, but even if there wasn't, with the cash he got, he'd still done pretty good.

"Here." Bobby put a long screwdriver down next to the briefcase. "Sorry I gave you a hard time, man, but since you been home you ain't exactly been rolling in cash and I can't live off credit."

Bobby must really want to know what's in the case, he wouldn't leave. "No problem," he said, then stood up and carried the briefcase, screwdriver and beer to a table against the far wall. Screw Bobby.

He started working the latches. He got one open pretty easy but the second one was a bitch. The screwdriver popped out from under the latch and raked across his knuckles. He shook his hand then dabbed at the bloody scratch with a napkin. Then he started to pry again. Finally the latch busted open and he lifted the lid.

He got it halfway open before slamming it shut. He sucked in his breath then peeked in again to make sure he had seen right. Money. Stacks of it. He picked up the briefcase, shoved it under his arm and headed for the men's room, leaving the beer and screwdriver on the table.

The bathroom was empty. He went into the stall and locked the door, dropped the seat on the toilet and sat down. He put the briefcase on his knees and opened it. He loved the smell of money.

He thumbed through a stack and counted a thousand dollars. A second stack had the same amount. Eighteen stacks on top, three stacks deep...something like forty, no fifty stacks. Fifty-thousand dollars!

He leaned back against water pipes. All his life he'd been waiting for a big score. A really big score. One that would set him up. No more jacking drunks for thirty bucks. He could maybe start a club, hire some dancers, maybe run a string of whores. Top-dollar whores, not like the junkies that hung around the River Rat, who'd do you for a twenty dollar bag of dope. Man this was it. The big time.

The sound of the door opening interrupted his thoughts. He eased the briefcase closed, heard the sound of footsteps going toward the urinal, then the sound of pissing. After the guy finished his business and left, he got off the toilet and went back into the bar, the busted briefcase under his arm.

He grabbed his beer and the screwdriver off the table and headed back to his stool.

"What's in it?" Bobby asked as he sat down and put the briefcase on the bar.

If he left it would seem suspicious. He had to play it cool. "Nothing much, just some business stuff, a couple other things. I might get something for the case."

Bobby was staring at the briefcase. "Not after you busted the locks. Lemme see it," he said, reaching for the case with his non-crutch hand.

He grabbed the case with both hands, "Leave it alone."

Bobby raised a hand up. "Okay, Okay. It's just that's a nice case, don't see many like it. I was just thinking I might give you something for it. Could probably get the locks fixed if you didn't bust 'em up too bad. Where did you really get it? Ain't no one gonna come looking for it are they?"

"I told you I found it in Pirate's Alley."

"Yeah, I know what you told me," Bobby pointed to a strung out whore in the back of the bar, "and she's a virgin." Bobby shrugged. "I was just curious, that's all."

"I'm going to hold onto it for a couple of days."

"Okay, no big deal. I gotta go take care of something, need another beer?"

He thought about it. It wouldn't look right if he left. Usually after he scored he'd spend several hours in here. This time he'd have a couple beers then leave. "Yeah, sure, bring me a Bud when you get a chance."

Bobby moved off down the bar.

He started thinking about how to spend the money, then he looked around again for a dealer. He had to get some dope just to get his head on straight. He didn't see anybody so he drained his beer, then looked for Bobby, supposed to be bringing him a new Bud.

There he was down at the other end of the bar talking on the phone. Bobby spent a lot of time on the phone. Probably

running his little sports book. Bobby wouldn't take any bets from him anymore--knew he couldn't pay--but all that was about to change.

A few minutes later Bobby came back with a fresh Bud draft. He stayed, talking about different people that hung around the bar, who was in jail, who was doing what.

Only half listening to Bobby, his mind was on the money. Who was this guy he hit, this "VHM" and why was he carrying fifty G's?

He finished his beer and stood up to go when Bobby said, "Hey, what's your hurry? Have another, this one's on me."

Free beer from Bobby? Too good to pass up. "Sure what the hell."

He watched one-legged Bobby hop off. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he saw a man sit down at the stool next to him--a man he didn't recognize. The man dressed nice, in suit and tie, but he had that look. Wasn't no citizen.

A second man sat down on the other side of him. Dressed up nice like the first, also had the look. Something bad was going down. Time to go. He grabbed the briefcase and tried to get up. He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. The second man, the one on his right, was holding him down. "Don't get up."

"I, uh, gotta go."

The first one, the one on the left, said, "Nice briefcase."

He turned to the left. He was scared. "I just found it. I was trying to find out who it belongs to."

"Is that why you busted the locks off with a screwdriver?"

How the hell did they know that? "I was just trying to see who the owner was is all."

The one on the left jumped up and grabbed him by his collar. The man dragged him to his feet and punched him in the stomach.

It happened so fast he didn't have time to react. One second he was breathing fine, the next he was doubled over in pain, sucking wind. Then he felt something heavy slam into his right kidney. He turned his head, the guy on the right had punched him. He felt himself lose control, pissing in his pants.

The guy on the right grabbed the briefcase with one hand and each of them grabbed hold of one of his arms. They dragged him outside onto Decatur Street.

There was a car parked outside at the curb. It was a nice new black Lincoln. They shoved him into the back seat. One climbed in behind him and the other went around the other side and got in. He was sandwiched in back between them.

There was a driver already in the car; he took off as soon as the doors were closed. The one on the right opened the briefcase. "Is it all here?"

"Of course it is, I didn't touch it, like I said all I was trying to do was find out who owned it."

The one on his left said, "Shut up!" and slammed an elbow into the side of his head.

It hurt bad, he was dizzy. He had to figure out a way to get away from these guys, maybe try explaining again. "Listen I don't know nothing about this case, man, like I said I just found it--"

Wham! Another elbow to the head. Then another hit, this time from the right. The man had moved the briefcase enough to punch him in the ribs.

The one on the left spoke again, his voice calm. "I seen you around. You're a small-time stick-up guy. You did some time a while back, right?"

He was bent forward, holding his ribs. "Yeah."

"This time you messed up bad, taking off the guy with the case. That money belongs to us."

"But I don't know anything--"

Another punch in the ribs from the right.

The one on the left again, "You keep lying, we keep beating you. All we want is the truth."

Maybe if he gave them the truth he could get out. He straightened up enough to see outside. They were stopped at the light at Canal Street. The light turned green and they made a right, the only way you could go with no left turn or through traffic allowed. "You're right, I took it, but I didn't spend any of the money. Count it for yourself, it's all there, you guys can have it back, see."

"That's mighty generous of you, thanks."

The driver made the first U-turn and headed toward the river. Neither of the men were talking and the silence was terrifying. "I didn't even mean to hurt the guy, honest. It was just that we both fell down and got a little banged up is all."

The one on the left said, "Oh, yeah. You got banged up when you fell down?" Then the man smacked him again with his elbow, this time in the nose. White hot pain shot through his head as he felt his nose break. He could feel it filling up with blood. He looked down and saw blood pouring onto his shirt. "Is that how you got hurt?" the man asked.

His eyes were blurry but he could see they had reached the foot of Canal Street and were turning right. A minute later they drove up a ramp into a warehouse. Maybe they were just going to work him over, make him suffer some. It happened a

couple times in prison and he had survived. He could take a beating as good as the next guy.

The car stopped and the two men got out. He didn't move. The one on the left reached in, grabbed his hair and pulled him out. "Come on out, we want to talk to you."

He glanced around. The warehouse was half filled with shipping containers. The car was stopped in an open area near the middle. A few florescent bulbs, way up overhead, provided some dim light. The three of them were standing beside the car. One man in front of him; the other off to his side, just out of sight. The driver still in the car.

He asked the one who pulled him out of the car, "Listen, how is the guy, the one that got hurt?"

The man kicked him hard in the balls. Blinding waves of pain and nausea shot through him. He dropped to his knees, then fell forward onto his hands and puked.

"You want to know how he is, is that right?" the man asked.

He pushed himself upright onto his knees and looked up. The man was holding a gun, pointing it right at him. A big black automatic, the hole at the end of the barrel as big as an ashtray.

Suddenly his senses seemed to be in overdrive, everything looked brighter, noises louder. He could hear his own heart

beating, could hear their movements, the rustle of their clothes. He could feel the gritty cement under his knees.

The man with the gun said, "He's dead, that's how he is. You caved his skull in."

Oh, God, they were going to do him, right here. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. He must've hit his head when we fell. I swear to God I--" He saw a blinding flash as bright as the sun, but he didn't hear anything. A second ago he could hear everything, now nothing.

Something hit him in the chest. It knocked the wind out of him, but it wasn't too bad, he'd been hit harder. He saw the man's lips moving but no sound was coming out.

Another flash. Damn, hit in the chest again. The man's hands weren't moving, he must be kicking him. Just like these punks to kick a man when he's down.

The man still talking but no sound coming out. He could barely see him now. The other guy must have turned the lights out. It was dark now, he started to fall, kept falling through the darkness.

THE END