

The Car in the Mexican Quarter

Jim Thompson



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"Quarter" originally appeared in the August 22 and 29, 1931, issues of the *Nebraska Farmer*, but has not appeared widely in print since. The story found its genesis in Jim Thompson's experiences as a bellhop at the Hotel Texas in Fort Worth. Like the story's victim, Thompson padded his salary with illicit income. "Quarter" is one of the two detective stories Thompson ever wrote, as he preferred to portray life from the

viewpoint of the criminal.

James Meyers Thompson was born in 1906 in Anadarko, Oklahoma, the son of a corrupt lawman. After an itinerant childhood, Thompson spent several years working in the oil fields of the southwest before settling down as a writer. Although he wrote 29 novels and two screenplays (with Stanley Kubrick), he never attained full recognition for his talents until after his death in 1977.

Part I

It was about three in the morning at Mexican Joe's. A dingy lantern hanging from the unused electric chandelier cast an eerie light against the cobwebbed walls. Everything was quiet except for the gentle snores of Joe who lay beneath the counter. I was eating hot tamales while I waited for my relief on the Mexican quarter beat.

There was little sound on the brick street outside. Occasionally a giant beetle whirling around the street light would crash into the pavement. At least it

sounded like a crash. Then you could hear, furtively, the smothered wail of an infant or the half-muttered speech of someone turning in his sleep. That was about all.

The buildings were two and three stories high and all wood. In some there were windows; in fact, practically all had windows on the street floor, but the other apertures were largely boarded up or stuffed with pillows and sacks. Only the distant swift transit of light through a crack told you that people lived, loved and died behind those dirty gray boards.

I wrapped the husks from my tamales up in a newspaper, laid it on the table and

placed a quarter on top of it. Then hearing footsteps outside I lit a cigarette and sauntered to the door, thinking of something sharp to say to Flannagan for being late.

I was about to raise the match to my cigarette when something about the footsteps made me hesitate. I dropped the match and listened, holding my breath. The heavy-footed Flannagan had never walked like that. I felt for the butt of my gun. Except for the police there are only two kinds of people who walk like the Mexican quarter at night, crooks and strangers.

A man in a pure white suit passed the

doorway. He was wearing white canvas shoes, too, so that a look at the back of his coat convinced me that he was in a uniform, a hotel uniform. The kind that bellhops at the Lansing wore during the summer.

This did look pretty rotten. The Lansing is one of the biggest hotels in town, but I knew that it stood for a lot of dirty work from its employees. One suicide a year is plenty for a big hotel and the Lansing had one almost every month.

I craned out of the door as far as I could and followed the nattily dressed figure with my eyes. His hair was black and slicked down with some sort of smelly

grease and his head was too small and sharp for an honest man. There was something treacherous too, about his easy skipping walk. He looked like the fellow you're always afraid of finding behind you on a dark street.

Then, at the corner beneath the street light he turned and I recognized him. Skippy Kahn.

If you'd be around town as long as I had I wouldn't need to tell you that Skippy was about the worst rat living. He was a sneak thief, a dapper for crooked games and about everything else that a decent man shouldn't be. But, because he was a stool-pigeon he managed to keep out of

jail. At that, I didn't see how he had managed to land at the Lansing. He was too tough an egg to work even in a place of that kind.

Naturally, I didn't have to guess but once I figure out that something dirty was about to happen with Skippy Kahn in the Mexican quarter. What I didn't think about was that it would happen to him. We all get fooled though.

He stood behind the lamp post evidently waiting for someone while I tried to keep out of sight and at the same time watch him. As I waited he lit a cigarette and flipped the match into the air. And almost as he had done it I heard the faint

hum of tires on the rough brick.

Slowly the car came on. It was without lights, I could tell, because there was no reflection against the sallow walls of the buildings about me. The motor was practically silent. It was, perhaps, a minute and a half after I first heard it until it had passed the doorway in which I stood. I opened the screen and I stepped out to the walk.

A little chill ran down my back. There was something so ghostly about that car. The curtains were drawn on front and side and with its slow easy movement it resembled nothing quite so much as a hearse. At the last minute I noticed that it

bore no license plates. Somehow, with premonition of what was about to happen I almost opened my mouth to shout.

Then, without warning the lights went on and Skippy who was almost in the center of the street was directly in their focus. He was at least a hundred feet away from me but in that brilliant glare I could see the expression on his face clearly. It may sound queer, but he looked like a rabbit being hunted by searchlight. And like a rabbit he stood there, paralyzed, and waited for death. For it was death.

The quiet motor suddenly hummed like a giant wasp. There was a sudden quick

clash of gears. In a moment, that easily gliding car assumed a breath-taking speed--the tires fairly hummed with the sudden acceleration. Then it was all over.

Skippy never moved out of his tracks. He didn't have time. The speeding black car caught him full-center with its bumper, downed him, spun him against the bricks, then with one last roaring effort sent him crashing against the shoddy frame of the building with a shock that shook the whole street.

Then the car was gone and for that matter so was Skippy Kahn.

Flannagan came panting up at that moment, derby hat in hand.

"Been watchin' 'im...why I was late...shall I call headquarters?" he gasped.

"Afterwards," I said. "Call the coroner now."

That morning I dropped in at the Lansing. Byers was the name of the superintendent of service. His clothes and his manners were a little too good for his job and he had a smile he could turn on and off. I didn't like him.

"Got a boy working here by the name of

Skippy Kahn?" I asked.

He raised his eyebrows.

"Charles Kahn, you mean, I'm sure," he said. "He was one of our best bellmen. He was killed last night. Didn't you read about it?"

"I saw it," I said. "And it wasn't an accident. He was murdered. I'm trying to find out why. Where was Skippy going last night when he was killed?"

Byers smiled helplessly. "If only we knew," he said. "But you see, there's really no way of telling. It's all a mystery here to us."

I got down to business.

"Listen," I said. "I know something about hotels. Don't you keep a record of the rooms that your bellboys go to? Don't they have to write down what they went to that room for? If they don't and you don't the Lansing has been breaking a state law for a long time."

I didn't have to mention the law but once to make Byers see the light. He folded up like a camp chair, took me across the lobby and presented me to the bell captain, and in a minute I was looking through the record of the room calls for the night. Then, assuring me that he would do anything within his power to

solve the mystery, Byers faded out of the picture. I didn't bother to thank him.

It had been a fairly quiet night so my job was easy. Skippy Kahn had only two calls between two and three o'clock. One of these had been to the room of an established guest of the hotel who wanted some aspirin. The other room looked as if it might be a clue.

I got the occupant's name from the clerk and caught the elevator up. A small nervous man with quick, jumping eyes opened the door. I showed him my badge and went in.

"What was Skippy Kahn doing up here

last night?" I shot at him.

"I don't know what you mean," he answered.

"Well, the bellboy that got killed."

Only his eyes betrayed the speed at which his mind was working, for his words rolled from his tongue as smoothly as if the answer had already been there.

"Why, I called for a blanket about two-fifteen," he replied. "The boy, Skippy, whom you mention, answered the call. He told me that linen room was closed and that it would be impossible to get

one. I asked him to try to procure one from a vacant room and I guess he did make some effort to fulfill this request. But he was unsuccessful and came back and told me so and I gave him a quarter and dismissed him. That was all I saw of him and all I know of him."

I didn't say anything. I stepped across the room and turned off an electric fan that was placed to blow across the foot of the bed. Then at the head turned off another. The sweat began to roll from his brow and from mine too.

"It was only about ninety last night," I said. "Why didn't you turn off these fans if you felt chilly?"

He turned white as a sheet. "Say, what do you want anyway?" he blurted.

"What have you got?" I asked. And before he had time to answer, I continued. "Now, listen here, Jack. you're likely to get into a whole lot of trouble about this mess. In fact, I'm going to see that you do get into plenty if you don't break square with me. Personally, I think you're on the level. If you want me to keep that opinion you'd better tell the truth. Now, I don't care about your personal habits or anything else. All I want to know is what Skippy Kahn was doing up here this morning."

When I mentioned "personal habits," his

eyes fell and I almost felt sorry for him. I knew his trouble.

"You won't have me locked up?" he asked, finally.

I said I wouldn't.

"All right then." He came over to where I was sitting and looked me squarely in the eye. "I'm a dopehead," he said, quietly. "I don't suppose that's any secret to you. I've been out of the stuff for two days. Last night I took a chance and called this bellboy. He said that he could fix me up. I gave him \$50. That's the last I've heard of him until you came in just now."

I got up and looked him over carefully.

"Your story sounds pretty good," I said, "especially since we found a fifty on Skippy. And you don't look like a crook. As far as I'm concerned you can check out any time you want to. But one more thing: Did Skippy give you any idea as to where he was going to get this stuff?"

He shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid he didn't," he replied. "He did say that he could get it in less than five minutes, although I don't suppose that will help you much."

"You never can tell," I said, and left him.

Five minutes did mean something to me.

The Lansing is practically in the center of town, which means that there are no suspicious dives within a radius of several blocks. Five minutes would not allow a man time to descend and ascend on the elevator and to run to the drug store on the corner. The drug store was closed at night anyway. That meant that Skippy Kahn was depending on delivery service and I believed that I knew just the place most likely to peddle dope.

I got off at the mezzanine and found my way to the telephone room. The chief

operator showed the night's records of outside calls willingly. I found the number I wanted in a short time.

"Where did this call come from?" I asked.

She laughed. "We're still trying to find out," she said. "The room it was supposed to come from was vacated at ten o'clock last night so there really shouldn't have been any call. Probably the girl who took it just made a mistake in the room number."

"But isn't it possible," I asked, "for there to have been a call from this room after ten o'clock last night? Couldn't the man

who checked out of it have gone back later and called?"

She nodded. "He could have, but it isn't logical. A man who leaves his room at ten wouldn't be likely to go back at two in the morning to 'phone. He'd probably be picked up in the hall by the house detective if he tried it."

I thought a minute. These telephone operators are pretty reliable girls, regardless of what you say about wrong numbers. Besides, I wasn't quite ready to give up my pet idea.

"How does this sound," I asked. "This fellow that checks out of his room leaves

his door open when he leaves. Someone passing by takes advantage of the opportunity to use the 'phone without spending anything. Possible or not?"

"Now," she said, "that sounds like what actually happened; in fact, I'll bet it did happen that way."

I thanked her and hurried out. In just two minutes (I timed myself) a taxi had taken me to the Owl Rent Car stand.

Dago Red Ivers was inside at his desk. I have known Dago Red for several years, but he did not offer to get up or to shake hands. He merely stared at me out of his cold brown eyes.

"Well," he said, finally, "what do you want?"

"The man who killed Skippy Kahn," I replied, without hesitation.

He sniffed. "So do the police."

I grabbed him by the shoulder and whirled him around facing me.

"None of your wisecracks," I snaled.

"I've got you dead to the pin at last. I've known for years that you were peddling here but I couldn't prove it. I can now."

"Listen. This morning between two and three Skippy Kahn called this place and

gave you an order. You've had ti in for Skippy for a long time, he knew too much. But you didn't want to take a chance on bumping him where you might get caught. So you got him to go down into the Mexican quarter on some pretext and had him wait for the order. Then you ran him down.

"You didn't have any license on your car and your lights were off but I recognized you and I saw the car sitting in the back when I came in. Flannagan was with me and he can testify about the car and you too. Now, do you want anything more or are you willing to own up?"

Red look at me coldly. Then he broke

out into a nasty laugh.

"So you and Flannagan recognized me?"
he said.

"Yes."

"And the car too?"

"I'm telling you," I repeated.

Still laughing, Ivers picked up the telephone and called a number. He motioned for me to listen.

"Give me the chief of federal revenue,"
he said to the voice at the other end of
the wire. Then, "Hello, Chief. This is
Red Ivers. One of our local detectives is

here accusing me of a murder last night. Tell him something for me, will you?"

He handed the 'phone across the desk and I took it. "Marshall speaking," I said.

"Oh hello, Marshall," came the chief's voice. "Sorry but I'm afriad Red's got the laugh on you this time. We've had him padlocked for the last week pending investigation. Just unlocked his joint about an hour ago."

Dago Red's laugh trailed me through the door as I went out. I felt my ears burning. What a fool I had been not to realize the fact Skippy Kahn's calling

that number by no means meant that he had got it. But I didn't mind the personal humiliation so much as I did seeing the case go to smash. My detective work had been fine. It just hand't worked. Fault enough.

Disappointed, I headed for the station. And for want of anything better to do I went over to the morgue from there and had a look at what was left of Skippy Kahn. He was pretty badly jammed up, but there were a number of scars that had never been made by a car.

That gave me an idea too, but I couldn't do much with it. The fact that he had used dope himself only puzzled me. For

if he had had a supply why had he not sold it instead of sending for more? Probably not I decided.

I sat down on a bench and thought back through every angle of the affair. Studying, I could see that I had been wrong in trying to pin the crime onto Dago Red. In the first place, it was an amateur's job at murder and "Red" could hardly qualify as an amateur. He might shoot, poison or knife a man, running over him would be too crude. Then, there was the matter of those missing license plates. A professional would have exchanged plates, realizing that their absence would be likely to bring down undesirable attention.

Then, I thought of the way the car had approached Skippy. It had traveled very slowly until it was almost on top of him. What had been the idea? Had his death been the eact of a mind that worked upon the spur of the moment? Had it been unpremeditated? It looked that way.

I had this much then. Skippy had called some friend. The friend had been afraid to make a downtown delivery so Skippy had met him in the Mexican quarter. There, the friend had suddenly decided to run him down. With this much, I called headquarters.

"What friends did Skippy Kahn have?" I asked. "Who did he run around with

most?"

The answer came like a flash.

"Skippy Kahn didn't have a friend in this town and no one would have run around with him for fear of being taken for a stool pigeon."

I was desperate. "How about relatives?"

"Only one. Wife. Here; I'll give you her address."

I caught a car to the address given and knocked on the door. In the driveway was a neat, black car. It shone like glass from bumper to tail-light. There were

thousands of others in the city just like it.

I was pretty curious about the kind of woman that would marry a man like Skippy Kahn. Naturally, I didn't expect much. I was in for a surprise.

The woman who answered the door was practically everything in a woman that Skippy was not in a man. Oh, of course you can't go through the mud without getting splashed but she had come as near to it as anyone might. Her brown hair was neatly combed and her eyes were large and matched her hair. I like her hands too, firm and well kept.

She knew what I had come for, of

course, and invited me in without delay. When we were both seated in the front room she spoke: "You don't need to tell me about Skippy. I heard about it and frankly I'm not very sorry. But I'll be glad to give you any clue in the matter that I can."

I twisted my hat in my hand. I had not expected her to take things so calmly and it rather upset me.

"Well, it's this way, Mrs. Kahn," I said, at last; "I really don't expect you to shed much light on the matter. It's more for the idea of leaving no stone unturned than anything else. You might tell me though whether anyone else used your car last

night. To your knowledge, of course."

She shook her head, looking me in the eye.

"No one used that car last night. You can see for yourself that it's as clean and new as the day it was driven out of the shop."

I nodded. "Yes, I noticed that." I studied her for a moment while she met my gaze. Then I looked at the carpet. It was a trifle muddy.

"Well, Mrs. Kahn," I said. "There really isn't much use in questioning you further. You may get a call from the station, but

that's just a matter of form. I wish you luck." I arose and extended my hand.

She took it hesitantly, as if fearing some trick. Casually I stepped to the window and looking out at the car.

"By the way," I said, "did you know that your front license plate was upside down?"

I heard her gasp. Then she crowded past me and looked out at the car. The plate was in its proper position. She turned on me, fear mixed with courage on her face.

"A trick? Well, you can't trick me. You haven't got a thing on me and you know

it. You may as well leave."

"Afterwhile," I agreed. "In the meantime you might tell me what Skippy called you about between two and three in the morning. Also, why you washed and polished your car this morning."

"He didn't--I didn't!" Her voice was almost a whisper.

"Oh yes he did," I insisted. "The call is on record at the hotel. And it's pretty plain that you just got through dolling up the car. Now, spill it."

"I won't!"

It was hard of me but I had to do it. I walked over to the 'phone and removed the receiver. Police headquarters," I said, holding down the hook.

She was across the room in a flurry, grabbing my arm. "I'll talk. Oh, give me a chance!"

I put the receiver back on the hook. "All right. Go ahead."

She cried as she talked, but they were the tears of nervousness more than remorse. So her story was fairly coherent.

"Skippy kept a supply of the stuff here in

the house. He was too much of a coward to keep it with him. I know that if it had ever been found he intended to shove the blane onto me. He didn't have much.

Only enough for his own use; so I was very surprised last night when he called me and told me to bring it down.

"My first idea was to refuse. Then I knew that I would have to pay in more ways than one if I turned against his wishes. But I was fraid of being caught and like a fool thought of taking off those plates would make me safer. I didn't realize that they would be almost sure to lead to my arrest.

"I have never drive a car a great deal so

that I was deathly afraid as I went along the dark streets of Mexican town. I had laid the package on the floor where I could crush it and scatter the contents in case anyone tried to stop me. But without lights I lost track of its position.

"You saw the result. I did not know that I was so near to my destination, but I knew that I would have to have that package ready when I arrived. Skippy would not stand while I hunted and fumbled. So for just a minute I risked turning on the dashlight. But I was unfamiliar with the switch and I turned on the headlights. That frightened me more than ever, especially when I saw that I was almost to Skippy. I tried to

turn them off again, but was unsuccessful and being short on time I let them go and leaned over to look for the package. It was under my heel.

"I had my elbow against the rear lever and my goot was over the accelerator. As I slid down in teh seat my toe naturally came down on the gas. The jerk threw my arm against the gear lever and clashed the gears. Thoroughly frightened now, I jerked at the gear desperately bringing my foot down on the gas harder than ever. Then, I shut my eyes. I don't know how I got around the corner nor how I got home. But here I am, wanted for the muder of Skippy Kahn."

"Will you tell me one thing more?" I asked. "Why you ever happened to marry Kahn?"

She shrugged her shoulder and grimaced. "I don't know. People do foolish things. Then he wasn't always as bad as he got to be. After we were married I had to stick with it. He wouldn't listen to a divorce. I know he would have killed me if I'd ever tried to get one. He usually had a pull with the police, too, so it wasn't any use to go to them."

"Well, he won't bother you any more," I said. "I've got to be going now."

I started toward the door.

Frightened, she stopped me.

"Where are you going?"

I grinned. "To look for the party who killed Skippy Kahn."

"But I just told you--"

"You didn't tell me anything," I interrupted. "Not a thing. That's the only thing you'll have to remember. Can you do it?"

For the first time she really smiled. "You're square," she said.

I went out the door.

