

Sam Spade Ain't Nearly Dead Enough

By Bill Wolfe

My secretary, Page, calls these *bread and butter* cases. Me, I call 'em boring. But don't take that the wrong way. I *like* boring. I've had enough excitement to last me couple'a lifetimes. All I'm doing is tailing some rich guy's wife to see what she's up to. Any Private Dick anywhere in the Stream would recognize the drill in a heartbeat.

All you have to do is keep an eyeball on the Skirt whilst makin' like you ain't even there. Meanwhile she's just running around doing her errands, getting her head shaved or her nails polished and stuff. One case I had a few years back, I even started getting into the habit of a weekly pedicure. No kidding. It's kinda' neat to have some pretty young chippy workin' hard to scrub, scrape and shape your toenails. I didn't go for the polish but I did finally let her talk me into to a hardening coat. Clear. If you think that makes me a fruit, I suggest try sayin' it to my face. That's all I got to say on the subject. Besides, the client was picking up the tab. Turned out the dame was usin' her manicurist as a shill to set up her little runday-voos.

So I been following my current Mark for about a week. Picked her up at her fourteenth birthday party and followed her off and on for the next few years through to her first trip off-planet, Bethdish, City of Lights. One of my all-time favorite burgs. Pretty young thing, just a kid, really, and so far there ain't nothin' too freaky goin' on. She's taking some classes during the summer, so I start the tail as she skedattles from her Contemporary Lit class at the *Collegium Lux* and she takes a cab downtown towards the bazaar. Her family ain't exactly hard up for the geetus, if you get my drift. Now don't ya know it? She gets out at the *Mare* Tower and walks right through the door of the downstairs bar. If you ain't already heard 'bout the *Mare Inebrium* it's the best damn gin joint on Bethdish. Hell, in my humble opinion, the best anywhere. First-rate booze all the way; and the hooch is always sweeter on the client's tab.

The tab, now that's another part of the routine any Shamus would know about. Always get a receipt so's the client knows where his money's goin'. And ya' gotta pad where you can to cover the cheap joints, snitches, bribes and bent cops where there ain't gonna *be* no receipt. That's one of the reasons I always liked it when I got a chance to drop into the *Mare* on business. Max, the bartender and manager of the joint, was always good for addin' up the bill so's that maybe my tab was a little inflated. Sometimes he would accidentally leave some other bozo's bill—providing he pays cash—on the bar next to me while he's schmoozin' up some doll. I always made sure I tipped him real good even when I wasn't on the client's credit chit.

So I guess you can figure my disappointment when I come into the bar and it ain't Max behind the counter. *First time for everything*, I says to myself. Max is the only bartender I ever knew workin' the main bar at the *Mare*. And that includes all the time I spend here Downstream. And that's lots. But today here's this kid working his ass off tryin' to keep up with the lunch crowd. And the kid ain't bad.

Mostly, the *Mare* uses a state-of-the-art firewater sloshing system to pour and deliver the hooch. But any place this big and complicated there's some drinks that you just got to do by hand. Kind'a lends that personal touch, too.

So I'm watchin' the kid as I phase my roscoe through the security check. Security at the *Mare* ain't tiddly-winks even by my standards. But I don't give up my gun without I got a real good reason. It ain't professional. And besides which, there's something funny about that kid workin' the bar. I just can't put my finger on it.

I'm not worried about the weapons scanners too much. I got a special arrangement with Max and The Owner on account of this work I'm gonna do for 'em both, Downstream. So I ain't really breakin' no rules. If they somehow nab me for carrying on the premises, I got a code memorized that'll open a file The Owner's got in the *Mare's* computer that'll tell 'em it's okay for me to go packin'. But that's another story. It's the kid that worries me. It's like I've seen his mug somewhere's else.

I've taken a gander at a lot of WANTED posters over the centuries and I got a real knack for remembering faces. So as I walk into the joint, I kind'a wander around a bit makin' like I'm gawking at all the curiosities hangin' on the walls—you know, the strange alien art, vintage space suits and various gew-gaws The Owner is always sending Max from his collection. All the while I'm rackin' the noggin 'bout where I've seen this kid before.

And there's plenty of nutty stuff to look at in the *Mare*. But for me it ain't the junk hangin' on the walls. It's the clientele this place attracts that always manages to surprise me. I've been in a lot of multi-species dives but this one always takes the cake. For instance, there's these two furry dudes sittin' at a table and at first I think one's a Wookie. He's big enough and all covered with brown fur 'cept he's sportin' these two weird, four-humped antenna-like things on his head. And he talks good, kind'a goofy soundin', but it ain't all growls and howls like a regular wookie. The little furry guy has this big, bushy tail, talks with a squeaky voice and is sportin'—swear to Darwin—an old-style leather flying helmet and goggles. For some reason, it's the little guy who gives me the heebie-geebies. Strange place, the *Mare*.

"Are you working, Timmy?" a low, husky, sexy voice says right into my left ear. I try as hard not to jump out of my skin as I try to keep eye contact—*just eye contact this time*—with Trixie, at any age the best lookin' dame I've ever seen. *Don't rake your peepers down her front* I says to myself as I turn to give her a wink.

"Yeah Doll, but maybe I can make some time when you get off duty, if you're interested." I'm tryin' to act frosty and not like I would dump this case, my job, my life and my 'trick' for an hour in the back room with her. No chance she's buyin' the act, though.

"Make some—*time*—Timmy? You're too much. That's the best joke I've heard all day." She laughs and butterwasps are dancin' in my gut. And I last almost ten seconds before my traitorous eyes do their little dipsy-doodle down her gold spandex halter and miniskirt. All the way down to her splendid gams. *Damn!*

She sees it. She sees that I know she sees it, and everything changes. Her eyes lose their playful glint and I feel like a schmuck. *Honest Judge, I just couldn't help myself.* Now I'm just another crude barfly leering and gawking at the merchandise. I felt like I'd just done something dirty. Only the bad kind. Savvy?

She smiles like she understands that I'm kickin' myself for nothing so I changed the subject. "I followed my Mark in here about an hour from now so I'll need to pull a Liberace before she walks in. Any chance Max will be in any time soon?" Trixie, the best waitress in any Stream, was also the *real* bartender, Max's, girlfriend. She always seemed to know what he was up to.

"No." And her grin tells me that she knows *exactly* what Max was doing. And how long it would take. She knows I'm one of the few folks privy to Max's *other* assignment. Course, she don't know anything 'bout how bad Max's project is gonna SNAFU before it all gets worked out. Those poor kids are his children, grandchildren and so forth, after all. But then Trixie hits me with a real gutbuster, "But let me introduce you to Larrye."

On her worst day, you can't hide much from Trixie. And this was Trixie in her prime. Before she got all hard inside from The Troubles. I've seen her wade through blood and ichor to wrap a tourniquet around the stump of an arm that she'd just lopped off with a vibroblade, saving the life of a . . .well, that's Downstream so far as to make no difference, now. Suffice it to say that she saw right off that the mention of the kid's name gave me the Willies. So THAT was where I knew the kid from. Cripes! He was so young, and no scars.

"Anything I should know?" She asked, concerned.

About a bejillion things I could name just off the top of my head, Dollface. "Nah, I'm just gonna get to know him some, down the road. Didn't recognize him, t'sall."

"Well then, it's about time that you two meet. I've got other tables to wait, you know, can't stand around all day giggling like a schoolgirl." And she cradles my arm to walk me up to the bar and introduce me to the man who will someday both save and royally kick my ass. I felt like a virgin on her honeymoon.

"Larrye," Trixie called. "I'd like to introduce you to somebo. . ."

"TIMBO!" Larrye shouted. And a hundred staggered memories almost swamped me. Larrye was ALWAYS just too glad to see me. This really was him, and he was *already* calling me 'Timbo.' It's not like I was born with the moniker, and *everybody* calls me

Timmy, even my mother. But Larrye called me 'Timbo' from the first time we met. . .only I'm learnin' now that it wasn't the first time. Not for him, anyway.

"Good to see you, again." Larrye was obviously busy but he drops everything to come to the end of the bar and puts out his hand. His real hand, not the bionic one he'll get when he. . .but that's Downstream. I shook it. Couldn't think of anything else to do.

"Hey," he says, digging in his pocket. "Did you ever catch that guy you were looking for?" And he starts counting out some mazula. Kid looks like he's doin' pretty good with the tips. "The one with the little girl who *wasn't* his real daughter?"

Trixie gives me this look. She's catching on faster than I am. Yeah, she's about as smart as anybody I've ever known. Of course, she knows what I do and she's even privy to some of the rules I have to live by. I look to her for help and like the trooper she will someday become, she comes to my rescue.

"Where do you know Timmy. . .uh. . .Timbo from, Larrye?" Trixie has a way of focusing *any* man's attention when she wants. Don't know how she does it; but I've never seen her fail. And she didn't drop the ball this time, either. I try to thank her with just my eyes. And you know something? I didn't have any trouble at all *not* giving her the once-over. Funny huh?

Larrye paused what he was doing, a partially uncrumpled bill in his hands. "Uh. . .yeah, sure Trix. A year or so back, before I met Max and got on here at the *Mare*, I was in pretty poor shape. On the streets, you know? Well one day Timbo comes running down the alley where me and a couple of . . . uh. . .friends were huddled around a can of burning cardboard trying to stay warm and uh. . .Timbo, you want to tell her about it? I don't know any of the background, or anything."

"You're doing fine, Kid," I says. All the while I'm trying not to listen too hard to the actual events so's not to bring on a causality loop. But enough so that I'll know what to do when the time comes, see? Sometimes this job ain't all it's cracked up to be. Frequently, the biggest trouble with time travel is keeping your mouth shut.

"Well, anyway," Larrye starts again. And I can see just how green he really is. I never knew much about his life before the Corps. There's a lot of stuff I'm just gonna have to look up when I get back to the office. "Timbo asks if anyone wants to pick up a few credits. Oh yeah, and he wants somebody who can run like hell if he has to. That right, Timbo?"

"Tell ME the story, Larrye," Trixie says.

Trixie is a really special Lady. Have I mentioned that? Anybody else, man or woman, would've come off sounding like a bitch with a line like that but Trixie had this way of just *making* you do what she wanted. And you usually end up trying to thank her for the opportunity just to please her. I bet the brunos in this joint hardly had to lift a finger when

she was on duty. So she keeps him focused and he sings his song like a two-bit stool pigeon.

"Yeah Trixie, sure. Well I tell him okay, I can do it and we take off running down by the old spaceport fence, the blasted part, and all the while Timbo's telling me that he's looking for a tall Vexian, which doesn't make any sense even now, who will be walking away from the restricted area with this little girl in tow and how the kid's not his daughter. And then Timbo here does something really strange. Excuse me, I'll be right back."

Just then this big D'rrish scuttles up next to us and asks Larrye a question about his bill. I can't tell if he's Kazsh-ak Tier, cause all D'rrish look alike to me. I mean, it's the five-hundred pound gorilla joke all over again. "Where does a half-ton scorpion with an anti-armor blaster strapped to his stinger sleep? ANYWHERE HE WANTS TO. But Kazsh-ak Tier was a buddy of mine and I would have enjoyed a little jaw time with him. If it was him, that is.

I *have* seen the D'rrish Supreme Commander—though I guess he's still doin' his Ambassador gig in this part of the Stream—in the *Mare* lots of times Upstream of here and I've gotten used to the idea of him having all his parts and segments still in place. But one D'rrish translator sounds like another to me and Larrye doesn't bother to introduce us. I wonder sometimes if we all look alike to *them*. I'm thinkin' maybe, that as well as visual and voice stuff, they use pheromones to identify individuals. And I change mine with daily injections when I'm on a case. 'Better safe than sorry,' as Larrye will someday teach me. And it ain't a gentle lesson, if you get the gist.

Trixie is looking around like she's missing out on a birthday party and I understand that she has to get back to work. Poor Blanche is running around faster than I've ever seen her move—and for a substantial woman, she navigates with surprising grace—but she don't seem to be shooting Trixie no dirty looks. Well, she knows that Trixie won't leave her in a bind without a good reason. Don't know how Trixie knows how important this is, but she does. Max is one lucky son of a . . .

"Larrye," Trixie says real low, but somehow she's also commanding him, you know? That's something I've seen her do before, but Downstream. At least this time she wasn't ordering nobody to go and die with both of them knowing it; just to buy us. . .me. . .some time to change the past a little. "Finish the story so I can get back to work, okay?" Cool as a cucumber, like he don't know she just ordered him to do something, Larrye comes back to the end of the bar and picks up where he left off. "Not much left to tell, really. Timbo gives me a few credits and tells me to trade coats with him. Really!" Larrye aims a nod in my direction like he's wanting me to back him up on this. As if. "He gives me his coat and hat and tells me to stand on this corner and be conspicuous till I hear gunshots, at which time I'm to run like crazy and call the cops, or otherwise for an hour. He takes-off down an alley trying to squeeze those big shoulders of his into my ratty old coat and that's the last I ever saw him. Till today, anyway." "Last thing he says to me when I asked him his name and what to tell the cops was that I was to say that there was a 'tee-one temporal emergency'. . .and to call him Timbo."

I nodded to Trixie so's she can get back to sloshin' booze. I had enough now to flimflam the kid. Imagine that! Feeding *Larrye* a line to keep him happy. There was. . .or will be a time in my life when I would learn the hard way NOT to ever try that crap with Larrye. He could always see through me like I was a kid with his hand in the cookie jar. *Well Old Man, it's time you started learning that neat little trick. And the first lesson's on me..*

The worst part of the whole deal is that I'm gonna stick *myself* with the nickname of 'Timbo.' My workin' name is Timaeus Sputnik. It's some old Earth language and seems to be some kind of inside joke. Maybe I'll ask Trixie what it means, someday. Nobody 'cept Larrye will *ever* know my first first name—not even my mother.

Timbo—sheesh! In all my years in The Corps, and now as a Temporal Private Investigator, I have never been more tempted to do a little *presto change-o* on the past and damn the unsanctioned paradoxes. But I knew I was just blowin' smoke. If I wasn't willing to warn my younger, stupider self not to time phase whilst rasslin' that murderin' son of a bitch in an active FTL field. . .

Hell, in Corps training they said it was *supposed* to blow up the damn time machine implanted in my chest. I was loosin' the fight and I figured I'd just croak us both rather than let him keep slicin' up Immortals. Instead, the damn thing just disappears after it burns a cavity in my body the size of a baby's head.

Geeze, that hurt.

And to beat it all the bastard gets away thinkin' I'm ready for the wooden kimono. It wasn't till after a bunch of surgeries, a year of therapy and a medical discharge from the Corps that I figure out I don't even *need* the dingus to skip around the time Stream, anymore. Now I got me a bona fide 'trick,' natural time travel. Big deal. So me? I decide to just hang out my shingle and go private. Most times when you retire from the Time Corps—I mean *really* retire, not the feet-first kind—you have to turn in your gun, your badge and your Temporal Manipulator. But hey, not even the big heads know for sure what happened to mine. First time ever—no pun intended—that one of us ever managed to loose the thing. Lucky me, huh?

Since I'm no longer on the squad, they don't clue me into squat about new research, but my company snitch tells me that they keep tryin' to *replicate* the process. Wish they'd let me bump gums with the 'volunteers' they must be usin'. I wouldn't wish that kind of pain on anyone. Well. . .not on too many, and that's a fact.

So I guess when the time comes I'll just go ahead and tell Larrye to call me 'Timbo.' I'll at least recognize the Old Man—the Kid—in that alley, warming his hands with a bunch of street bums. But I still wondered about the story I was gonna lay on him that day. What's this shinola 'bout a tall Vexian?

So Larrye goes back to work and so do I. He tries real hard, but I don't let him pay me for the coat—he hocked it for food money and a warmer one a few days later, after all. In all probability it's the same one I'm wearing now, which is a shame. I like this thing. Maybe

while I'm sittin' here makin' small talk with Larrye, I'll just find out where he hocked it and pop back to that shop and buy it again. No rules against that. . .uh. . .mostly. But you 'gotta remember that I really like this old flogger. It's reversible, you see? It's a plain khaki on one side and black on the other. Larrye looks at me funny when I take it off and turn it inside out a few minutes before my Mark walks through the door.

This way, if I screwed the pooch and she notices that she was being followed to the bar by a guy in a black trench coat and hat, she don't think nothin' of another bozo *already sittin'* at the bar wearin' khaki and no hat when she walks in. You see? Love this coat. Low-tech stealth is always the best. Less to go wrong than with invisibility fields, holographic skin jobs and other gadgets. Maybe you noticed, I don't have no real hankerin' for implanted hardware.

Not any more.

But she shouldn't be expectin' no tail anyways. She comes in and takes a table near the door. I can watch her through the mirror as I sip my bourbon and lie to Larrye about bein' a regular, real-time Private Dick. I leave out the Temporal part, for now. He'll learn eventually. He'll learn lots. And whad'ya know? He even pads the bill a little for me. Couple minutes later her boyfriend waltzes in. Big beefy blonde guy from college. He's spendin' Daddy's money like he's scared it'll grow legs and wander off. They been bangin' each other for a week or so, now. Nothing unexpected. She's gonna start her freshman classes as soon as she gets this summer school stuff out'a the way. Sociology major but she'll change it to Poly-Sci by next semester. She won't even meet the guy who hires me for another fifteen years. He just wants the skinny on who she *used* to mess-up the sheets with.

Hey, it pays the bills, Pal.

The End