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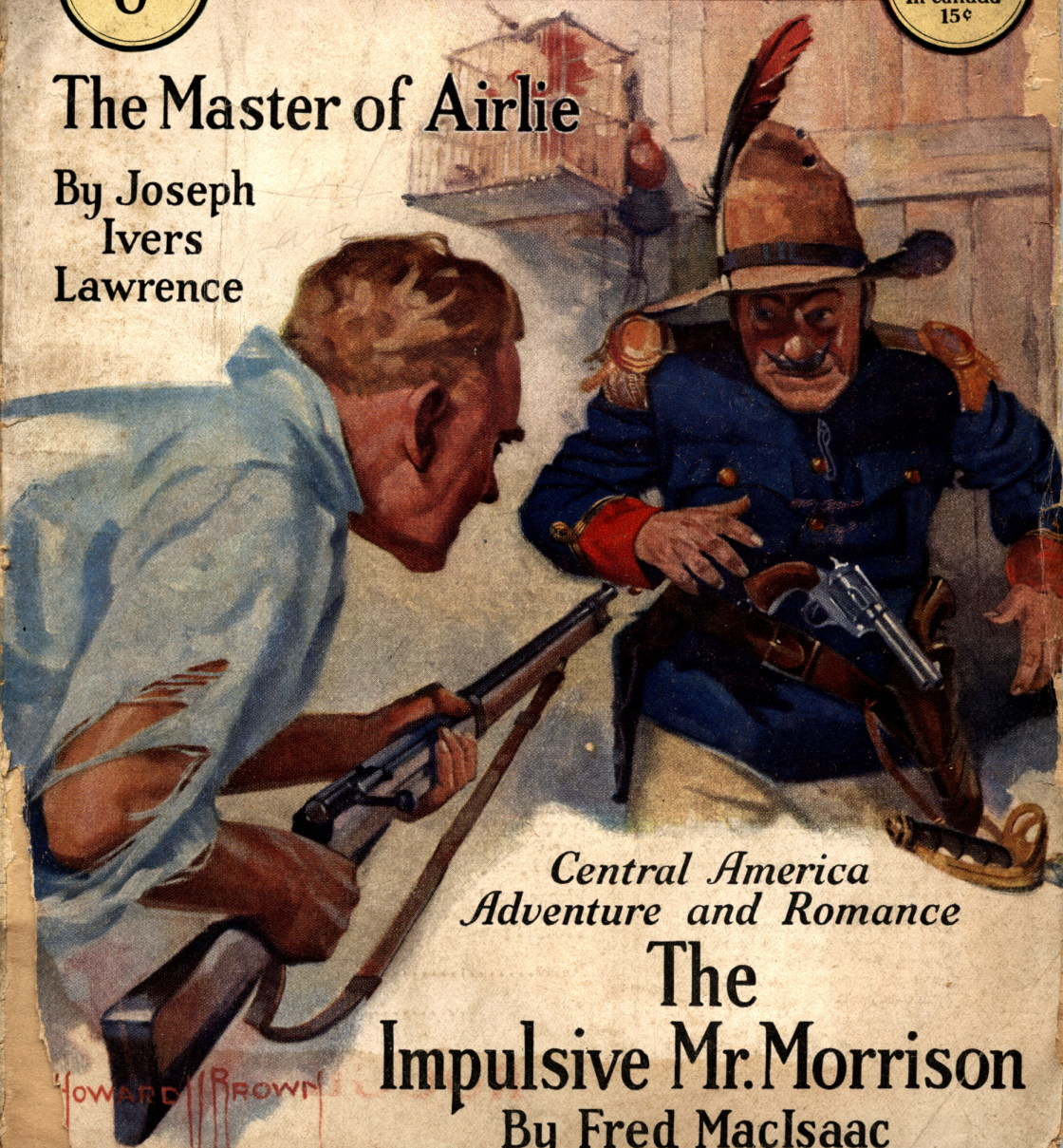
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The Framed Fifty

By KARL DECKER

*Fifty dollars was the face value of that bill framed
over the bar—but it was worth more to sentimental old
Mike O'Donnell than to any one else.*

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from
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Over the center of O'Donnell's bar hung a fifty-dollar bill ornately framed in mahogany and gilt.

It was to Mike O'Donnell what the gin-bottle-eyed god N'buango is to the tribal chief of the Mampasis. It was his fetish and his faith.

An old custom this, of framing the first bill taken over the bar, a custom fallen into decay in the United States since the coming in of the Volstead law.

To O'Donnell, however, the Volstead law now meant no more than a dry-sweeping ordinance to an Eskimo. O'Donnell had left the Volstead law far behind him.

When that wrecker of barkeepers' happiness had fallen upon his native land O'Donnell migrated. Packing up everything he had—bar, bottles, chromos of attractive ladies in attractive if unconventional poses, and the framed fifty-dollar bill—Mike O'Donnell had taken ship to Havana. There he set up his establishment line for line, bottle for bottle, keg for keg, as it had been when it was "Mike's Place" on Broadway. And squarely over the center of the bar was placed his talisman, the framed fifty-dollar bill. O'Donnell would have left everything behind rather than that.

It was part of him, of his prosperity.

Years might come and years might go, but O'Donnell would never forget that first night of freedom and independence. He had served his time as an apprentice. He had mixed 'em and shaken 'em and poured 'em straight for years, in the days before the cash register had cast its blight over the bartending

fraternity. Making his own change, trusted by his boss, he had played fair with that boss. He had never at any time held out more than twenty per cent, but this, thriftily hoarded, had set him up in business.

Rare good fortune was his when it fell to his lot to locate on a Broadway corner in the Thirties, when that section was the very heart and center of New York and the Tenderloin police station the busiest in the world.

Now, from the vantage point of his safeguarded retreat in la Calle Dragonos in Havana he grew to look back upon those early days with something of dislike and displeasure. Nostalgia never affected him. He was glad to be in Havana.

During the long, drowsy summer months he did better than he had ever done in the United States. A steady trade in the American colony and scores of tourists drifting in day by day kept his bank account sturdy and kept him out of the red. He was growing older, but he handled the trade himself. To put in an assistant would mean putting in a cash register, and O'Donnell was decided and firm in his refusal to permit the ghoulish chimes of Dayton to ring out across his bar.

In winter he flourished like a palm tree in a flooded oasis.

The élite of his own country flocked in upon him. Ladies whose names he knew from the society columns as well as he had known the politicians of his own ward in New York, came fluttering gayly into his bar, calling it "quaintly homelike," perched on stools, they ate frankfurters and sauerkraut and chile con carne as though to Havana bred. Men famous and widely heralded by the press called him by his first name and seemed pleased at his recognition of them.

It was paradise to O'Donnell. New York had never been like this.

And always after one of his pleasanter evenings, before drawing the heavy steel blinds in front of his door and starting off for his home in Jesus del Monte, O'Donnell looked for a moment upon the framed fifty-dollar bill as though burning incense before it.

He could never forget the night it came to him, back on Broadway.

His was not a crowded opening. In the street outside, a sweeping, whistling wind drove the massed snowflakes in a white cloud across his windows. On the pavement, where it drifted, there were white hills four feet deep.

He had set his opening for six o'clock in the evening, and at that black hour only a scant half dozen of his friends appeared.

But among them was "Red" Walker, smiling, debonair, sheltered in one of the huge tan overcoats popular among the wise ones of Broadway in those days. Young Mr. Walker exuded prosperity.

"The first bill goes into the frame?" queried Red.

"Sure, sir," said O'Donnell. "The first bill over this bar will hang over this bar as long as I live."

"Then frame that," said Red, tossing a fifty-dollar bill on the counter.

It was opposed to all the ethics and conventions of bar openings. One is supposed to buy the first drink with a one-dollar bill. It is a purely economic proposition, that takes only a small amount out of circulation and cripples the finances of the establishment not at all. Every one present realized Red had made a faux pas.

But the effect upon O'Donnell was as though he had stepped upon a high tension wire. The economics of the situation affected him not at all. Whatever of thrift and canny calculation there might have been in his blood took a vacation. He flushed with pride—a pride that sent the blood dashing through his body as though under fifty pounds pressure. He lifted the bill proudly and tenderly.

"It'll always hang over my head, Mr. Walker," he said.

They might have a fifty-dollar bill framed in Delmonico's, he thought, although he had never been in the place; or that newly opened castle of magnificence on Thirty-Third Street, the Astoria, might be able to show some such trophy; but he alone of all the humbler sort in his profession could display such an evidence of high-class trade. He was smitten with a quality of pride that almost became arrogance.

"You'll always keep it in the frame?" asked Red.

"As long as I live," said O'Donnell almost devoutly.

"That makes me the godfather of the joint," said Red.

"Another round for everybody."

And then, taking a handful of change that almost wrecked O'Donnell's till, Red Walker disappeared into the white-blown night.

He never came back. Long after, O'Donnell gathered from conversation in front of his bar that Red Walker had done two stretches in stir, one in Joliet and another in San Quentin; and he worried and sorrowed as if over a wayward son. He always had the feeling that some day the debonair youth who had become godfather to "Mike's Place" would come swinging jubilantly through his slatted doors.

But when he set up shop in Havana this feeling died. He felt now that he was cut off forever from the man to whom he felt, in some vague fashion, he owed his fattened prosperity. In the bar business so much depends upon the auspices under which one makes the first plunge. This ranks not with superstition, but with folklore.

More than a third of a century had been tossed into the discard when O'Donnell one night discovered that when he wished he might retire.

The statement from his bank over which he pored at his desk told him this. In Spanish though it was, he knew what the figure meant. With no children to think about and only one aged sister, an annuity that would bring him in a yearly fortune lay ready to his hand.

But then the whirl of the arrival of a crowd of Americans changed the trend of his purpose. After all, he liked what he was doing too well to quit.

In the bar were women in pearls, men in evening clothes; folk fresh from the many delights of an Havana afternoon,

preparing for the delights of an Havana night, were waiting for him. They wanted cocktails, the kind he had made in the old days when the number of varieties could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

The joshing, kindly meant, the praise of his skill, the happy gay atmosphere, strengthened the old man's decision. He would tend bar so long as he could stand on the grating.

And as they left, Mike shot one swift look at the framed fifty-dollar bill.

How Red Walker would have fitted into this environment! Red was refined and had a snappy line, to use the language of these later days. He would wise-crack with the best of them. He would have belonged.

"That's a pretty bill you've got up there," said a gray man in gray clothes and a gray hat who stood in front of the bar; an inconspicuous man, the sort one would never notice whether alone or in a crowd.

"Yes," snapped O'Donnell, suddenly laconic. The man looked like a dick.

"Lemme see it," said the gray one.

"Why?" asked O'Donnell, but there was nothing of the old pugnacity in his tone.

"Hand it down," said the other, and O'Donnell, clambering upon a chair, detached the small frame and laid it reverently on the counter.

The man in gray squinted at it for a moment then ripped the backing off and took out the bill. As a mere formality he tossed upon the bar a small gold pin he took from his vest

pocket. It was a United States Secret Service operative's badge.

"We are working here with the co-operation of the Cuban government," he said. Then he took a fountain pen from his pocket and across the bill in red ink scrawled the word "Counterfeit."

"How long you had it?" he asked.

"Thirty-six years," groaned O'Donnell huskily through dry, parched lips.

"Well, you're an innocent party, all right," said the man in gray. "This is some of old Paul Schwartz's work, and he's been dead for twenty years. We got all his plates. Never made a vignette yet that didn't squint. Red Walker used to shove for him, and Red died in Atlanta."

THE END.

[The end of *The Framed Fifty* by Karl Decker]