

# *ACE of SPADES*



A SHORT STORY BY  
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A passer-by would never have known from looking at the entrance of the Ace Detective Agency that it hadn't had a client in nearly two months. The front door and windows, which displayed the gold-edged letters 'ACE', looked immaculate. The inside of the office was furnished with stylish chairs, and the leather-topped desk was kept neat and ordered. However, behind the door marked 'Private', the reality of the agency was quite different. Jim Gardner, private investigator and owner, lay on a camp bed in the corner of the room. Recently he had been staying alive on corn flakes and canned beans. The only time the bell at the entrance rang was when Gardner went out to the pub for a pint of beer at four o'clock every afternoon.

'The confessional', as Gardner called his private room, was cluttered with dirty coffee cups, old newspapers and cheap detective novelettes mixed with a couple of Hammetts and Chandlers to raise the tone a little. The agency had become his home after he had been forced to leave his apartment. The lack of a case was wearing away at his physical and mental edge. He felt like he was going soft, he longed for some action. He watched the hands of the clock as they ticked nearer to four. He took pride in his procedural correctness, and would never dream of closing up five minutes early. He lit another of his French cigarettes. He had developed a taste for them during his service in the Mediterranean theatre-of-operations during the war. As the smoke wafted up towards the ceiling, he counted the passage of time with the rhythmic beating of the fan. By the time he had finished the cigarette, it would be closing time.

Soon Gardner was walking down the street towards The Ship, which was his preferred pub. As always, he carried his Colt Detective Special. In his ten years in the detective business he had been glad of his side arm many times. Even at times like these, when he was not working on a case, he felt insecure without the twenty-one ounces of cold metal holstered in his waistband. Instinctively he glanced at everyone he saw, sizing them up and filing them in his mental dossier. Outside The Ship he saw two men leaning against the wall. They looked tough, and they wore oversized jackets – he guessed that they were probably carrying weapons in shoulder holsters. Perhaps they were providing security for a meeting taking place in the pub. They looked purposeful, severe. They couldn't merely be standing around on the pavement. They were there for a reason.

Gardner was on the alert as he stepped through the door of The Ship. Instantly he took note of the people present. There were two people sitting at a table in the corner. There were three at the

bar, and a lone man at a table next to the jukebox.

“Ace!” the barman called out as Gardner approached. “The usual?”

“As always.”

The barman served Gardner a pint of bitter. “How's business?”

“Same as it was last week, and the week before that.”

“Sorry to hear it. You should come work for me. I could use an extra hand behind the bar sometimes.”

“I sincerely hope it won't come to that. I don't think I would be able to avoid nosing around in your customers' affairs.”

The barman leaned over the counter, and spoke in a hushed tone. “Hey, now that you mention it, what do you think of those two in the corner? They worry me.”

Gardner turned to look at the two men sitting at the small round table beneath a painting of a Napoleonic era sea battle. They both wore expensive-looking tailored suits and appeared to be deep in conversation. The older of the two had an expression of stern authority. He didn't speak much, but his words seemed to carry great importance. It looked as though he had no hair beneath his hat. His younger companion had the air of a reckless upstart, and he spoke with speed and conviction, although at a muted level. Not being able to overhear the discussion, it could have been about anything, but Gardner's instincts insisted that it was something shady.

“What worries you about them?” he asked the barman.

“They've been here several times in the last fortnight. They always seem to be having a serious conversation, sometimes they argue. But never at more than a quiet volume. And another thing, whenever they are here, there are two men standing outside. I might be wrong, but they look like some kind of hoods to me.”

“I wouldn't worry about it. It's probably nothing” Gardner lied, his mind was made up – he was definitely interested in these two. He slowly drank his pint, whilst constantly glancing over at the table in the corner. After ten minutes of continued discussion, the older man signed what appeared to be a cheque, and handed it to the younger man. At that point they got up and left the pub. Gardner quickly downed the remainder of his beer in one large sip and headed for the door.

“See you, Charlie.” he said as he left.

“Tomorrow at four.” the barman replied.

As Gardner left The Ship, he saw the older man get into a Bentley with the two goons who had been standing outside. As he glanced down the street he saw the other man, and decided to follow him on foot. The thought of some excitement was attractive despite it not being a paying job. He was tired of long days doing nothing but waiting for a case.

Gardner walked at a fast pace to catch up with the man. As he got nearer, he took out one of his cigarettes. He stuck it in the corner of his mouth unlit, and as he came up alongside the man, he asked "Got a light?"

The man turned around and stared Gardner down with his cold grey eyes. The angle of his narrow black eyebrows gave his pale skinned face the look of a chiselled ice sculpture. Everything about his face was angular. After a few awkward moments, the icy grip of his stare loosened, and he took out a gold lighter from his pocket and lit Gardner's cigarette.

"Thanks. Nice lighter."

"You want it to buy one?"

"I don't think I can afford it."

"You're probably right about that." The man spoke with a strange hint of a German accent, smothered in what sounded like an attempt at a BBC radio announcer's voice. The corner of his mouth curled up in pleasure, unable to hide his snobbery. The grey eyes skimmed over Gardner's attire – a grey suit of reasonable quality, with a white shirt made of good quality Egyptian Cotton and a navy blue silk tie. After giving a nod of reluctant approval he turned and continued walking down the street, and Gardner followed.

"My name's Gardner, by the way. Jim Gardner"

"I'm Cooper."

"Pleased to meet you. What's your line of business?"

"Government work."

"Oh really? What sector?"

"A sector that you are not allowed to discuss with strangers." he said with curt dismissal.

"Secret work, is it? I was involved in some of that stuff in the war, you know. Military intelligence, North Africa and Italy."

They walked together another three blocks. Gardner tried to engage Cooper in conversation, but it was a lost cause. Eventually Cooper entered an anonymous looking block of flats leaving Gardner on the pavement, no wiser regarding the mysterious conversation in The Ship.

Two days later, Gardner was still waiting for a case. As always, he locked up his office at four o'clock and walked to The Ship for his pint. As he approached he looked out for any sign of Cooper or the older man. There was nobody standing outside on this occasion, and he went into the pub, finding only one patron there. Charlie poured the pint of bitter and served it to Gardner.

"Any sign of those two men from the other day?" Gardner asked.

"None at all." Charlie answered. "Which is just as well. Some of my regulars have been

starting to smell something fishy. I don't want anything to hurt business. Those two characters are up to no good. Mark my words. I mean, you're a detective. Surely something strikes you as odd?"

"They're mysterious, no doubt. Apparently the younger one – Cooper is his name – works for some secret government department."

"How did you find that out?"

"Simple." Gardner chuckled. "I asked him."

"Well, you've got balls, I must say."

"That's nothing. I'm going to find out what's really going on."

"If you do that, your drinks are on the house for the next month." Charlie winked at Gardner.

"So, I've finally found myself a case?"

Charlie extended his hand across the bar, and Gardner shook it. "We're in business." Charlie said. "Now, how about another pint to mark the occasion?"

"Never mind the beer. If it's on the house, I'm having a double Bourbon."

Gardner hadn't been drunk in a long time. In fact, the last time he could remember getting truly plastered was eight years earlier – VE day. He had been stationed in Italy at the time of the German surrender. Somehow, an American colonel had managed to stock the local bar with all the booze he could lay his hands on. The finest Italian wines, confiscated from some high ranking German officer had helped his regiment celebrate the end of the war in Europe in some style. Gardner, however, remembered nothing of the week which followed the victory. Somehow, though, the Allied forces had managed to hang on despite their stupor.

He fumbled in his pocket for his keys, eventually retrieving them and opening the door of the agency. There was no light at all in the office, and in his current state, he could not be bothered to try and find the light switch. He walked towards the private room in the back. Just before he reached the door at the rear of the office, his foot came into contact with an object that seemed out of place. Gardner's reactions were not swift enough to avoid the obstacle, and he tripped over it. He crashed to the ground and lay there in a daze for a minute. Eventually he stood up and went for the light switch. When the room was illuminated he saw that the office furniture was in a mess. The chairs were knocked over – it was one of them which had tripped him up – and the desk drawers had been stripped out. The locks on the filing cabinets had been hacked open, and all his paperwork had been stolen. He swore loudly, and walked towards the back room, being careful not to trip over the chair again. The lock on the door of the 'confessional' had also been broken, and he pushed the door open and saw the room in an even more chaotic state than usual. Cups and plates lay broken on the floor, and his detective novels had been thrown from their shelf and spread all over the bed

and table. The clothes in his cupboard had also been searched through, although at least they had not been damaged.

Gardner didn't feel that he had the strength to continue standing, so he moved over to the camp bed and sat down. After a minute of sitting there, he collapsed back onto the mattress. His head was swimming as he lay there, and before long he was violently sick into a small waste bin. He then rolled over to the other side of the bed and passed out.

He woke up at seven in the morning with a headache that felt like a hot poker had been plunged through his forehead. He got up out of the bed and surveyed the room. The chaos and confusion was too much for him to contemplate. He glanced down and saw the waste bin full of vomit. He groaned in disgust, cursing the people who had ransacked his office, and also the drinking of the night before. There was no doubt in his mind about who had broken in. It was almost certainly Cooper, or the older man from The Ship. Clearly, he had aroused their suspicions that day.

Gardner considered his options. He could report the break-in to the police and turn the whole affair over to them, but his faith in the police was limited. He preferred to handle these things himself. He was certain who had done it, and he knew where to find him. It took more than an hour to clear up the mess, and determine exactly what had been taken. Gardner then showered, shaved and dressed. He did not feel like eating anything, and left the agency as soon as had put on a clean suit, and a grey fedora which he admitted to himself was purely because he liked to look like a Hollywood detective.

He walked as if going to The Ship, and then traced the route that he had followed with Cooper. He reached the apartment block which Cooper had entered. He gazed up at the building, which stood five storeys tall. He had no way of knowing which apartment Cooper was in. In fact, it was still a pure surmise that he actually lived here. Eventually he decided to go in, and knocked on a door on the third floor. A woman, about fifty years old, answered the door. She stood in a dressing gown with her greying hair in curlers. "Can I help you?" she asked gruffly.

Gardner took off his hat, "Sorry to disturb, Ma'am. I'm looking for Mr Cooper's apartment."

The woman stared quizzically at him. "You're not here to cause trouble I hope. That Mr Cooper is a menace. Since he moved in, there's always shady characters around here."

"I assure you I'm not here to cause trouble. At least not the type that you mean."

The woman frowned nervously. "He's on the next floor, first on the right."

"Thank you."

He walked up the next flight of stairs and found went to the first door on the right. He knocked, and while he waited he kept his hand close to where the .38 was tucked in his waistband,

ready to draw if necessary. There was no answer, and after quickly glancing around to ensure that no one was watching, he set about picking the lock. He had the door open in just over 45 seconds, and he entered the apartment, ensuring that he was as quiet as possible. He looked around the living room. At first glance nothing appeared unusual. The furniture looked smart and comfortable, the drinks cabinet immaculately stocked, and there was a phonograph with various jazz records stacked beside it.

He proceeded through to the study. Like the rest of the apartment, it was tidy and organised. There was a gold plated typewriter on a desk, and several papers lay alongside it. As Gardner moved towards them, he heard a shuffling behind his back.

“Don't move.” The voice was the faux British upper-class accent of Cooper. He stuck a pistol into the small of Gardner's back. “This is the barrel of a Colt .45 pressing into your back. Misbehave and I blow away the bottom of your spine.” Cooper's hand came around and frisked Gardner. He took the Detective Special from the waistband holster and pocketed it. “Now turn around slowly.”

Gardner obliged, and he stared into Cooper's almost lifeless grey eyes. A smirk broke across the pale, angular face, and Cooper spoke, “James 'Ace' Gardner, Private detective. I wondered what your game was the other day. Turns out you're a real live Sam Spade.”

“I prefer Philip Marlowe myself.”

“You'll wish you'd taken a job as a lavatory cleaner before I've finished with you.”

Gardner remained silent.

“Go and sit down.” Cooper said, as he pointed at a chair. He pulled out a short length of rope from a drawer and tied Gardner's hands behind the back of the chair. “Don't go anywhere.” he said as he left the study to make a telephone call. Twenty minutes later the older man from The Ship arrived at the apartment. He took off his hat and coat – he was bald headed as Gardner had thought – and entered the study. Cooper brought in another chair, and the bald man sat before Gardner.

“My name is Ambrose. I understand you are a detective, is that correct?”

Gardner still remained silent.

“I'll assume that is affirmative. Naturally it is of the utmost concern to me when a detective breaks into one of my employee's apartments and starts snooping around. Luckily Mr Cooper prevented you from discovering anything of significance. But let's start at the beginning. Who hired you?”

“No one hired me.”

“I appreciate you wishing to protect your client's identity, but you have no idea who you are dealing with. I assure you, you would be better off telling me who you are working for.”

“I have nothing to say.”

Cooper stepped forward and punched Gardner on the jaw. His vision blurred and his head felt dizzy from the blow. He could taste blood which was coming from his lip.

“The question stills stands.”

“I am not working for anyone, I'm here because my office was ransacked and I suspected your employee, Mr Cooper.”

“Please don't treat us like fools. Can I assume that you have learnt a little about me in your investigation? For instance, do you know how I lost my hair?”

Gardner shook his head.

“Radiation poisoning. A nasty little Russian trick. They laced my coffee with Thallium. It not only caused my hair to fall out – my skin was covered in nasty blue and brown spots, my blood turned to plasma and my bones began to crumble. As I'm sure you can imagine, it wasn't pleasant. In fact, its a miracle that I survived.”

“Why would the Russians do that to you?” Gardner asked.

“I will ask the questions here!” Ambrose shouted. “But it is an interesting story, so I'll tell you. I was born in Russia, but my parents went to Britain when I was a child. I grew up as an Englishman, and I ended up in the Secret Service. In the thirties I went back to Russia as a newspaper correspondent, and eventually became a double agent. I misinformed Soviet intelligence in the early stages of the war, while they were still allied to the Germans. After the war, I was posted to Berlin, which is where I met Mr Cooper. It was there that I was spotted by some old Soviet intelligence men who wanted revenge for what they saw as my betrayal. So they poisoned me with Thallium.” He ran his hand over his hairless head.

Gardner sat in the chair, feigning disinterest in Ambrose's suffering. He pondered what he had got involved in. None of it made sense. What would a former British Secret Service agent be doing in South Africa? And how did Cooper fit in? The story about the two men meeting in Berlin explained the German streak in Cooper's accent. He would now probably never find out, because they would surely not be dumb enough to tell him what their scheme was.

“Please, Mr Gardner. Be reasonable. If you want to stay alive you will tell me who you are working for and what you know. And like Russian Intelligence, I too know some nasty tricks.”

Cooper punched Gardner repeatedly, but the situation was hopeless. Gardner didn't have any information to give, and Ambrose would never believe that he had decided to investigate them primarily to relieve the boredom of not having a case to work on. The only answer was to try and trick them with false information.

“I'll tell you.” Gardner moaned. “The name of my client,” he struggled to get the words out as



he was breathless, “is Johnson.”

“Who is he?”

This was the tricky part. Not knowing what Ambrose was involved in, Gardner didn't know what story to make up. All he knew was that Ambrose was involved in intelligence, and Cooper claimed to work for a secret government department. “He didn't tell me about his job, or anything like that. But I know where he lives. I'll take you there.”

“You'd better not be leading us into a trap, Gardner.” Ambrose said. He turned to Cooper, “Get Ralph to bring the Bentley round to the front of the building. I'll clean this bastard up. We've got to have him looking decent. We don't want to attract attention to ourselves.”

Ambrose got Gardner to his feet and had to drag him to the bathroom, where he cleaned up Gardner's face and washed the blood out of his mouth. He made Gardner change into a clean shirt, and put handcuffs on him.

“Right, now we're going to walk down the car. No funny business, got it?”

Gardner nodded and walked out of the hallway and down the stairs. He hoped that the woman on the third floor, or one of the other tenants would see them leading him away in handcuffs but he didn't see anyone. They walked out of the building and Ambrose helped him into the car. Cooper sat on the back seat next to him, and Ambrose sat in the front passenger seat. The driver, Ralph, set off down the street. Ambrose turned around and asked Gardner, “Which way?”

“Drive two blocks down, and then turn right. From there it's another half a mile or so down the street.” Gardner kept watching Cooper in his peripheral vision, and also kept an eye on the driver. Once they had got onto the main road, the Bentley started to build up a little speed.

“Much further?” Ambrose asked.

“A bit. Just keep going.”

Just after finishing the sentence, Gardner thrust forward with his cuffed hands and got his arms over the back of the driver's seat. He lowered his hands over Ralph's head and pulled back sharply. The chain of the cuffs cut into the driver's neck. Ralph squirmed in agony and his right foot pushed even harder on the accelerator. Cooper lunged at Gardner in order to try and free Ralph from the handcuff garotte, but Gardner reacted and struck him with a well timed head-butt which knocked him out cold. The blow also made Gardner feel as if he had been hit over the head with a mallet, but he kept his strangling grip on Ralph and he felt the skin break and blood spatter over his hands. Ambrose was slow in reacting, he stared in shock at the scene for a few seconds before he too tried to pull Gardner off Ralph, but it was too late. The Bentley was weaving across the street and a truck was coming down to road in the opposite direction. The driver of the truck appeared to try and get out of the Bentley's way, but due to the randomness of the driving, it was like two people

trying to get out of each other's way, but both going the same way. The Bentley slammed into the front the truck.

Upon impact, the whole interior of the car seemed to lurch forward like a swimmer diving off the starting blocks. The driver's seat slammed forward into the dashboard, crushing Ralph's head between the steering wheel and the back of the seat. The seat itself cushioned some of the blow for Gardner, although he felt his right arm break as it slammed into the dashboard. Ambrose slammed into the windscreen and broke through it, his body ending up on the crushed bonnet of the Bentley. Gardner couldn't see Cooper from his position, which was up against the side door with his arms trapped beneath the mangled body of Ralph. The pain in his head and arms was intense, although the shock of the collision acted as a sort of dizzying painkiller. Blood from his forehead obscured his vision, and he closed his eyes. A few seconds later he was unconscious.

Shapes seemed to move around him like smoky visions without solid form. His eyes blinked, and the dry blood caked on his eyelids seemed to scrape as he tried to bring the world into focus.

“Can you hear me?” said a disembodied voice.

Gardner opened his mouth but no sound came out. The dark shapes gathered around him. He squirmed uncomfortably.

“Can you hear me?” the voice said again.

Gardner managed a feeble nod of the head.

“You're not too badly hurt. Your arms are broken, and you've got a few cuts and bruises but you'll be okay.”

“The others?” Gardner asked in a whisper which sounded like the hiss of a snake.

“The driver and the front seat passenger are dead. The man who was in the back seat next to you is alive.”

“He's dangerous.”

“Why are you in handcuffs?”

“They're criminals. I'm a private detective. Call the police.”

“I am a police officer, sir. What is your name?”

“Gardner.”

He passed out once again.

Soft white sheets rubbed against Gardner's skin as he awoke and tried to sit up. His back hurt, and he couldn't use his arms as they were in plaster. His eyes darted around the room. There was nobody around, the room was bare. A few cupboards, a mirror, everything was pristine white. It was like a dream. His head ached and his mouth was completely dry. As he licked his lips, it was like

rubbing them with sandpaper. He tried to move once again, but it was useless. He swore in frustration at his inertia. The minutes felt unbearably long, and he stared at the wooden door in hope that any moment someone might walk through. He desperately wanted to know where he was. And where was Cooper? The nagging questions hacked at his brain like a pick axe.

Finally the door was opened and a nurse entered the room. She was followed by a portly man in an overcoat.

“Mr Gardner. There is a gentleman here to see you.” the nurse said, and she helped Gardner up into a sitting position.

“Can I have some water, please?” he asked.

The nurse nodded and helped Gardner to drink a glass of water, and then left the room.

The portly man spoke, “Mr Gardner, my name is Henderson. I'm a government agent. I understand you worked in intelligence during the war, so you know what I'm talking about.” Henderson took two photographs out of his pocket. “Mr Gardner, I'd like you to tell me everything that you know about these two men.” He held the pictures out for Gardner to see. They were taken at the scene of the crash. One showed the corpse of Ambrose, the other the unconscious body of Cooper.

“The older one – the bald one – told me his name was Ambrose. That he was born in Russia, grew up in England, then was a double agent during the war feeding the Russians bad intelligence. After the war he was stationed in Berlin where he was poisoned with Thallium. That's about it.” He paused. “The other one said his name was Cooper, and that he worked for a secret government department.”

“Interesting.” Henderson said to himself. “Well, the older man's full name is Charles Ambrose. Or at least it was – he died in the crash. The story he told you was correct. After he recovered from the Thallium poisoning, he was made an advisor to the British foreign secretary, and then later transferred to a diplomatic post at the British embassy down here.”

“He also told me that he met Cooper in Berlin.”

“Ah, yes. Cooper.” Henderson paused again. “His real name is Hans Jurgen Lang. Grew up in an aristocratic family in Germany, was a member of the Hitler Youth, and served in the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division in '44. Apparently he was very friendly with an SS Colonel who managed to make off with a large haul of Nazi weapons at the end of the war and smuggled them out of Germany. And I'm not just talking about guns and grenades. I'm talking secret weapons – radioactive and biological weapons. He met Ambrose in Berlin in '47, and they went into business selling these weapons on the black market. But what I want to know, Mr Gardner, is how you got involved.”

“To be honest I've been wondering the same thing. It all started out of boredom, I guess. I

didn't have a real case to work on, so I more or less went looking for one.”

Henderson didn't seem to know what to make of Gardner's answer. He just sat by the bed with a bemused look on his face. Eventually, all he could do was chuckle. “It's a crazy world we live in, Mr Gardner.”

“You don't say, Mr Henderson.”

Henderson stood up, “Thank you for your time, Mr Gardner. I hope you recover quickly.”

“Thanks.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

Gardner thought for a moment. “You could go speak to Charlie Baker, the owner of The Ship, and tell him he owes me a drink.”

Henderson smiled, “Will do.”

As Henderson left the room, Gardner felt the inhibiting weight of boredom fall on him again, but he determined that this time he would just put up with it and not go looking for trouble.