

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations viii

Acknowledgments ix

1. The Gambler I

2. The Bug Boy 9

3. The Goose Girl 24

4. Synod 33

5. Whichcee 44

6. Sporting Women 57

7. The Biltmore Hotel 68

8. Buron 77

9. Kandahar 85

10. Pinkus and Omelet 96

11. English Harry 107

12. Testa 116

13. Gate Breakin' Adair 128

14. Ned and Scotty 136

15. "Get Giesler" 148

16. The Big Shots 160

17. The Dictograph Machine 171

18. "The Fateful Day" 180

19. The Percentages 188

20. July 4, 1946 199

Sources 213

1. THE GAMBLER

He had an easy, cocksure smile that drew other gamblers to him as if he had a secret. Even when he was motionless, he seemed to be bouncing subtly like a bandleader keeping time for “One O’Clock Jump” or “In the Mood.” He had earned the nickname “Big” Mooney not because of his size—he wasn’t all that big—but because he liked to sweep into fancy nightclubs and set up the house with drinks—especially champagne, if he was flush from a big winning bet. He described himself as a “gambler of consequence,” even if, at that moment, he happened to be “tapped out” and looking for somebody to float him a brief loan until he could get back on his financial feet. Games of chance, he said, were his life’s work. He had learned to spot somebody working the crimp in a card game before he had even learned to drive. He would bet on anything—football, baseball, racing, dice, cards, roulette, perhaps even two flies crawling up a wall if the odds were right.

His past was sketchy, and the two names he went by—Barney Mooney or Bernard Einstoss—left people wondering whether he was a bibulous, young Irishman or a cocky German. But no matter what name he used, the minute he walked into a book-

making joint, he moved quickly around the room, shaking hands with those who knew him. To those who didn't, he introduced himself simply as "Mooney!" in a strong voice. Even if you didn't know him, the point was, you were supposed to.

His father was a Jewish grocer, and his family had moved to Los Angeles in 1921, when he was eight-years-old. He had an older brother named Willie with whom he worked in his father's store. They both hated the work, and as a ten-year-old still in short pants, Bernard Einstoss began flipping coins in the schoolyard and gambling for chocolates, peanuts, money, or marbles. By the time he was in high school, he was betting on racing, prize fights, and even elections. Then he began cutting school to sit in the box seats with professional gamblers at Wrigley Park in Los Angeles, betting hundreds of dollars on the next pitch or strikeout.

He was sixteen when the stock market crashed in 1929. The lesson he learned from the crash was that hard work and enterprise only led to economic ruin, and he quit school. He took the professional gambling name of "Mooney" and spent months at Saratoga racetrack in New York, playing the horses. His extraordinary good looks might have made him seem inaccessible if he hadn't sprinkled his speech with the grammatical misconstructions appropriate for the warmhearted and earthy son of a neighborhood grocer. He wore fancy suits and a fedora with the front brim curled down just slightly, but he was half the age of the frustrated gamblers who envied his self-assurance and sought out his company.

His friends noticed that he was nervous and jumpy all the time, as if he were electrified or supercharged. He argued that success at gambling depended on skill, not luck. Small bets were behind him. He had grown out of schoolyard marbles and coin flipping.

He was only interested in what he called “major action.” It gave him a feeling of euphoria that he never felt in his father’s store. It wasn’t the exact moment that he won or lost that gave him an emotional rush. It was the *waiting*—that brief moment before the last card was dealt in a poker game, or the twenty minute wait for a race to be run—that excited him the most. It was even better than sex. When he did win, he was generous and reckless, tossing bills to friends and strangers as if they were Monopoly money. He was the “big shooter” who was unable to stop either the winning or the losing. If anybody had tried to pull him aside and warn him that gambling had taken possession of him, he wouldn’t have listened.

He cultivated an air of supreme confidence, as if good looks and good luck were his birthright, but he suffered periods of bad luck and gambling losses that undermined his confidence. The longer each period lasted, the more flamboyant he became in his speech and dress, as if the only thing keeping him from selling apples on the street was the appearance of confidence and wealth. Still, if a losing streak continued, it eventually began to gnaw at him that he was a loser, just another one of those unlucky “squirrels,” as he called them, who hung out in gambling parlors and at racetracks wearing long faces and begging for a loan from somebody to tide them over. Meanwhile, the frightening eruptions of anger that he periodically suffered over his gambling losses defied explanation. What reason did he have to get so angry? He had the world on a string.

In 1933, eager to find a steady income within the exciting world of gambling and bookmaking, he took a job with regular paychecks managing a bookmaking and gambling den in Las Vegas. The bright lights, the thick smoke, the smell of whiskey in the wood and the carpets, winners yelping like restless sled dogs—

just being around it all was enough to feed his irresistible craving for gambling action. Later that same year, he temporarily satisfied the craving by managing the gambling activities of the Cotton Club in Culver City. Then, to get what he called “walk-around money,” which he needed for quick bets, and which he kept in safe-deposit boxes around Los Angeles, he began organizing seedy smokers for police and lawyers who gathered in private clubs to watch stripteasers jump out of cakes and then slither like voluptuous snakes around brass poles.

In 1934 Big Mooney met Benjamin “Benny” Chapman, who had jug ears, sad, dark eyes, and crinkly hair that was beginning to gray at the tips. He had a quiet gambling confidence that stood in sharp contrast to Mooney’s flamboyance, and he looked old enough to be Mooney’s father. He had built his initial gambling bankroll shooting craps with fellow doughboys coming home from the Great War. With no other professional training, Chapman’s shipboard luck had been enough to convince him that gambling was the profession for him, and he had set up offices as a bookmaker in a luxury suite with special phone lines in the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. He boasted to his gambling friends that his markers were good all over the country and even in Cuba, and his room at the Biltmore, decorated with wood paneling and daily baskets of fresh flowers, became the meeting place for “gamblers of consequence” like the legendary Nick the Greek or his friend Big Mooney. On warm summer nights, when Mooney would come up to the room, dance music from the cavernous Biltmore Bowl, advertised as the world’s largest nightclub and the site of the annual Academy Awards, drifted up and into the open hotel windows, suggesting a glamour and luxury that mere grocers would never know.

The only way to get rich on the horses, Benny Chapman told Big Mooney on such nights, was *not* to bet on them. Only suckers tried to beat the races. Only squirrels like Mooney, beguiled by occasional hot streaks and ignorant of the percentages in gambling, kept coming back to the roulette wheel or the dice table until they had lost everything. Instead, Chapman told Mooney, book the bets of other squirrels. He would soon find himself as rich as those bejeweled and wealthy dancers down in the Biltmore Bowl.

Tired of the vacillations of his own racetrack luck, Mooney was eager to follow Chapman's advice, and he opened up a betting parlor in Huntington Beach. Chapman warned him not to "play from the other side of the counter," but he couldn't resist making bets himself now and then, and the club soon folded. Then he went north with a bankroll of \$450 that he borrowed from Chapman, and he set up shop as a "betting commissioner" at the Kingston Club on 111 Ellis Street in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, among three-story brick flophouses and dark bars with gaudy, neon signs. He liked to spend mornings at the club sitting as one of the numerous commissioners who took turns covering high-stakes wagers phoned in on football, baseball, or especially racing.

Despite Chapman's advice, horse racing continued to fascinate Mooney, because it was different. In racing he wasn't at the mercy of the mysterious laws that determined the turn of the roulette wheel or the roll of the dice. In racing there were handicapping percentages that he could control. In racing, if he was smart enough to remember how horses performed and patient enough to wait for the right opportunity, he was certain he could win big. All he had to do was stay away from the racetrack touts promoting foolish systems based on the Talmud or planetary alignments.

With a bankroll now to see him through losing streaks, Big Mooney began making calls from the Kingston Club in San Francisco to bookmakers in Los Angeles or back east who covered his horse racing bets. He boasted that on a good day, through booking bets as a commissioner and placing his own bets based on the handicapping percentages, he could win four or five thousand dollars, and he loved to hold court in the corner of the Kingston Club talking about how to beat the races. He said the first step was never to try to select the winner but instead to figure out which horses were going to *lose*. That changed the percentages, he explained. For him the percentages were the Holy Grail of gambling. “Percentage has got to win in the long run,” he insisted.

They began comparing him to Pittsburgh Phil, the nearly mythic, turn-of-the-century horse player who was credited with having invented racing charts, on the basis of which he was said to have won over two million dollars. Sure, horse racing was chancy, Pittsburgh Phil had confessed. But the races could be beaten if a player had a big enough bankroll to absorb the losses. And that was precisely Big Mooney’s approach. He had a bankroll now. His credit was good in any betting parlor in the United States. He was a big shot, a gambler of consequence who made huge bets, knew all the gambling angles, and possessed such personal charm and authority that even jockeys came to him seeking tips.

One night in October 1938, Big Mooney stood on the corner of Powell and O’Farrell in San Francisco, just around the corner from the Kingston Club. A cold, thick, San Francisco fog was settling over the city. Two gamblers of consequence stood with Big Mooney, both wearing heavy overcoats. Benny Chapman had

lost a fifteen thousand dollar bet that afternoon on the Stanford-Santa Clara football game, and he stood hunched against the cold as well as the misery of his loss. The other man with Big Mooney was the actor Lew Brice, brother of the film comedienne Fannie Brice. He wore a raked fedora and sported a thin mustache as finely groomed as eyebrows, and his face carried the same pasty, on-screen delicacy of his famous sister.

Two cops from the San Francisco vice squad approached and recognized Brice immediately. "Well, hello, Lew," one of them said.

The Powell Street cable car slid by, screeching in the fog, and Brice ignored the greeting.

The two cops explained to the three men that ever since a gambling crackdown in Los Angeles, San Francisco had been overrun with gamblers, con men, and vagrants. Now they were part of a police detail that was doing a citywide housecleaning, especially in the Tenderloin. It was all part of an effort to rid the beautiful city of what few blemishes it had, in preparation for the upcoming World's Fair.

"Lew," one of the cops said, "how would you and your buddies here like to take a walk with us."

It was an order, not an invitation, and the five men walked in the cold fog ten blocks across town to the city jail. In the light of the jailhouse, Big Mooney's good looks were striking, especially as he stood beside the still stooped-over Chapman and the delicate-looking Brice. But Big Mooney had been tapped out so often and had taken so many wrong turns—from petty larceny to auto theft to numerous bookmaking arrests—that his young face carried the look of both innocence and criminality.

What was his name? the police asked.

Barney Mooney.

How old was he?

Twenty-five.

What was he doing in the company of an old man like Chapman and a hopeless gambler like Brice?

Waiting for the Powell Street cable car.

To go where?

Back up the hill to his hotel.

Where had the three of them been?

A few clubs, that was all.

The men were booked on vagrancy charges. Brice posted \$250 bail from a thick roll of bills. But Big Mooney and Benny Chapman spent a sleepless night in jail, listening to howling drunks and the laughter of their jailers.

The next morning in San Francisco Municipal Court, a judge offered to dismiss the vagrancy charges if the three men would promise to leave San Francisco immediately.

Big Mooney spoke for the three of them. Well, of course, Your Honor, he said. We'd be halfway back to Los Angeles already if your two cops hadn't stopped us in the fog last night.