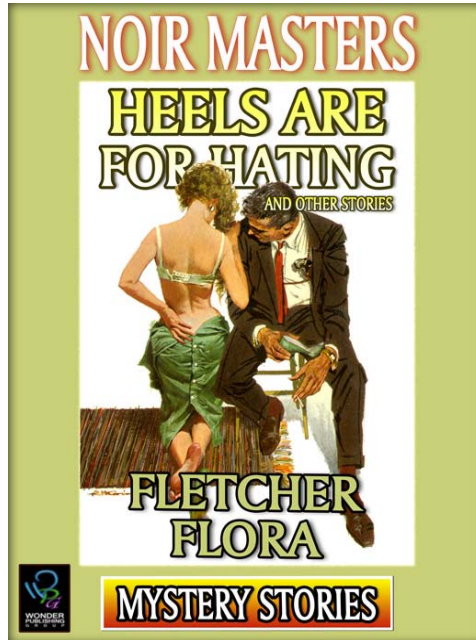


# POINTS SOUTH BY FLETCHER FLORA

From the collection **Heels Are For Hating and Other Stories** by Fletcher Flora



Published in 2010 by Wonder Publishing Group

[www.WonderPublishingGroup.com](http://www.WonderPublishingGroup.com)

\* \* \* \*

## **POINTS SOUTH BY FLETCHER FLORA**

(First published in *Manhunt*, June 1954)

\* \* \* \*

I drew an ace, and I needed it. With the pair that I already had, it established something substantial. Luck was going my way. I lifted my eyes from the cards to the face of Leo Gall, and I thought to myself again that it was like a fat olive with features. His eyes were screwed back into little puffs of skin as he examined his hand, and his

pimento-red lips were pursed into the shape of a wet kiss. It was a face I didn't like, though I pretended to like it for my health's sake, so I slanted my line of vision off over his shoulder to the face of Hilda Hearn.

Hilda was tired. About midnight she'd gone into the bedroom for a nap, but when she'd returned a couple of hours later, it was obvious that the nap had been too late and too short to do her much good. The muscles of her face had a tight, drawn look, her eyes were smudged, and her mouth was a soft scarlet smear. She slept too little and smoked too much, ate too little and drank too much, did too much of everything bad for her and too little of anything good, but tousled and smeared and worn to the bone, she was still a lovely assembly of female parts. Sprawled on the sofa with a highball in her hand, she combed free fingers through copper curls and sent me a smoke signal from smoldering eyes.

"One grand," Leo Gall said.

Beside me, between me and Leo as the betting went, Hugh Lawson cursed softly and bitterly, slapping his hand into the discard. His mouth and eyes were pinched at the corners by the long strain of losing, and his fingers shook as they fumbled a cigarette out of a limp pack and carried it to his lips. I did some quick calculation and figured he must have dropped at least twenty grand. Just about what I'd contributed myself to the fat welfare of our host. I also figured Hugh could afford it about as much as I could, which was not at all. He was a slim guy with a lean, hungry face and blond hair cut very short and square on top the way a lot of college boys wear it. He'd got most of his education in pool rooms and clip joints, but he looked a hell of a lot like a college boy.

"Out," he said.

I put my faith in three bullets and met the thousand. I couldn't bump it, because I didn't have a good bump left. A couple of hundred in chips, that was all.

"One raise, I'm a dead duck," I said.

Leo laughed softly and wetly behind a red, white and blue mountain. "Credit's good, boy. With me, it's always good."

Around the circle 90 degrees, Kal Magnus sighed and rolled his soaked cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. His hand struck the discard and flew apart, but

his expression was genial, signifying his indifference to luck that always ran one way or the other and would be good next time, or the next or the next, if it happened to be bad tonight. Being able to carry your luck comfortably from bad to good makes a hell of a difference in your attitude. Kal's was bad tonight, all right, ten grand bad, but you'd have thought he was playing for matches.

He said, "If you're worried about me, you're wasting it. I'm out."

Leo smiled. It was a very small smile, slightly sad. It was the one he'd been using all night. The one he used when he was looking down your throat.

"No raise? That's too bad. Well, you paid to see them, Andy, so have a good look."

He spread them slowly in ascending order, five little cards worth my last grand, and whichever end you read them from, going up or down, they came out straight. Better any time than three lousy aces.

I added my junk to the discard and said, "Take it away."

He took it. On the ring finger of his right hand was a diamond worth more than the pot. In the thick nest of black hair growing above the second joint of the finger, it looked like a glittering egg. And it was then, watching his fat hands rake in my dough, that I got one of those crazy ideas a guy sometimes gets when it's late, too late, and the world's gone sour. It was then that I began to think what fun it would be to clobber him. We began to settle the score, and all the time we were settling it, I kept seeing those fat white fingers with the black hair growing out of them. I saw them over and over in a dozen repellent engagements—dealing cards that brought me no luck, dragging in the fat pots, creeping like slugs over the soft flesh of Hilda Hearn.

I closed my eyes and kept them closed for half a minute, but the fingers were there behind the lids, so I opened them again, and the first thing I saw was his red, wet mouth. The lips were so soft and thick and full of blood. They looked as if they'd smash on his big white teeth like a gluttoned leech.

I went sort of blind, I guess. Blind to everything and everyone but Leo Gall. And I functioned for a few seconds in the terrible urgency of a single grim compulsion.

I stood up and leaned across the table and clobbered him.

He got a glimpse of knuckles coming at him, and his face had, for a split second, a ludicrous expression of surprise. His chair rocked back on its rear legs, hung for a moment in balance, and then crashed over. He hit the floor on his shoulders and skidded like a clown on ice, but there wasn't really anything funny about it. His head smacked the sharp edge of the frame of the sofa Hilda was sprawled on, and there was a dull, sodden sound like the bursting of a rotten melon, and he lay very still on his back with his fat gut rising like a strange and ugly growth from the floor, and it was not funny at all.

Hilda stood up very slowly, the movements of her arms and legs possessing the unreal quality of action in slow-motion. She stood looking down at Leo. "Jesus," she said. "Oh, Jesus."

Hugh Lawson's breath whistled shrilly through his nostrils, and Kal Magnus heaved his ponderous bulk erect. He turned his eyes from Leo's prone carcass to me, and his broad face was flat and still and hard as stone.

He said tonelessly, "You tired of living, Andy?"

I didn't bother to answer. I went over and knelt beside Leo. I felt for his pulse and found it. Then I passed my hands swiftly over the obvious places for a gun, but there was no gun on him. I knew he would come out of it soon, and I didn't want him coming with death in his hand. My death, I mean. Chances were it'd come soon enough. Soon and sudden, if I was lucky. Soon and not so sudden, if I wasn't.

Standing, I looked across the body at Hilda. Her lips were slightly parted, and the tip of her tongue appeared between them to slip slowly around the red circumference. Her eyes were hot and cloudy behind lids descending to veil an intense inner excitement.

On the floor between us, Leo stirred and shuddered and came up jerkily from the hips, leaning back for support against braced arms. He shook his head from side to side and brought one hand forward and up across his split lips. He sat there on the floor and looked in a stupefied way at the smear of blood on his hand. At last, moving like an old, old man, he got one knee under him and rose slowly to his feet. His eyes were as dull and lifeless as dirty metal disks. They slid from face to face until they reached and

remained on mine, and his voice was a gassy whisper escaping through loose teeth and blood and swollen flesh.

"You dirty bastard! You scummy little louse! Get out of here! Get the hell out of here fast! And right now you better start living it up. Right now you better start to live up all your God-damn life in the next twenty-four hours, because maybe you'll have that long and maybe you won't."

Hilda took a step toward him, lifting one arm with a jerk, as if she were breaking ice in the joints. "Look, Leo. It was just one of those crazy things. Andy just went nuts for a second, that's all."

He turned to face her. His mangled lips were working, and a trickle of saliva leaked out of one corner of his mouth and down across his chin. "The hell you say! So we just forget all about it, is that it? So we kiss and make up? Well, it's nice to know you're so damn concerned about the lousy punk. If that's the way it is, maybe you better get the hell out, too."

"It's not that way, Leo. You know it's not that way."

His voice broke controls, skidding up to a high, feminine scream. "Get out! Get the hell out, you Goddamn tramp!"

She stood very still for a moment, her breasts held high against her dress, and then she turned without speaking and went into the bedroom. She returned immediately in mink and went over to the hall door and out, still without speaking and without looking at any one of us. When she was gone, I helped myself to my hat and followed. Behind me, Leo's shrill voice said, "Don't try to run, punk. Wherever you go, wherever you try to hide ... "

There was more, but I never heard it, because I cut it off with the door and went down the hall to the elevator. Hilda had left the car in the lobby, and when I'd brought it up, Kal and Hugh still hadn't come out of the apartment. Taking time to clear themselves, I thought. Making certain that none of Leo's trigger men came looking for them in whatever good time was convenient for killing. On the same trip, probably, when he came looking for me. God knows I couldn't blame them. I could blame them in no way for not wanting to share Andy Corkin's suicide. Descending alone in the

elevator, I cursed myself in the bleak and passionless futility of irreparable idiocy, but it only came to the same result that most things had come to in the life of Andy Corkin. To nothing, that is.

Outside by the curb, the taxi was waiting with its engine running. The back door opened as I came out, and I scooted across the sidewalk and inside. The taxi lurched forward, swerving out into the traffic lane, and Hilda came over against me with a kind of restrained violence, her body twisting around to a frontal approach, her soft mouth hungry and aggressive. I snarled fingers in her short copper hair and pulled her face down so hard that I could feel her lips flatten and spread and her teeth click sharply against mine. Her breath was hot and labored, and after a long time she twisted away and fell back in the seat, her breasts rising and falling in slow cadence with deep, ragged gasps.

"Andy," she said. "Andy ... "

"I just thought we'd better be making hay, honey."

"Don't say it that way. Don't ever say it that way."

"You heard Leo. Live it up, he said. Twenty-four hours, he said."

"Why, Andy? For God's sake, why'd you do it?"

"I went blind, honey. I saw his fat fingers, and I thought of you, and I thought of the fingers and you together, and so I smashed his ugly mouth. Besides, maybe it was just getting too late. Maybe I'm just a sour loser who should've stuck to penny ante. Who really knows what makes a guy do something crazy? He does it, that's all. First thing he knows, it's done."

"Now what, Andy? What're you going to do now?"

"Something pleasant, I hope. It's up to you."

"You've got to get away, Andy. Just till I've had time to try to fix things."

"Run?"

"Call it what you like. If I can't get it fixed, I'll run after you."

I shook my head. "There's no place far enough, honey. And if there were, there's nothing fast enough to get me there."

"Jesus, Andy, you can't just sit and wait for it. There has to be something we can do."

"There is. I said it was up to you. Something pleasant, I said."

She came back then, and my hands crept in under mink, and it was as if she was trying desperately to give me everything in no time at all, but a taxi's no place for it, a taxi prescribes limits, and so pretty soon I said, "We'd better go to my place, honey."

"That's where we're going. I told the cabbie."

"Sweet baby."

"I can't stay, though, darling."

"Why the hell not?"

"I've got to get back."

"To Leo?"

"Yes."

"Don't be a fool. He kicked you out. Remember?"

"Look, Andy. It was just because he'd been humiliated, and I'd seen it happen. It was just because his bloated little ego couldn't stand my seeing it. When I get back, it'll be different. By that time, he'll be wanting me so bad it'll be stronger than anything else, even stronger than the effect of my seeing him slapped in the chops like a fat brat." Her voice sank to a thin complaint. "I've been earning the rent, Andy. Believe me, I earn it in plenty of service and a thousand futile damn regrets."

"Don't tell me. I don't want to hear it."

"It's for us, Andy. If I left him, it still wouldn't clear things for us. He'd have us both killed. Can't you see it's for us? You're the only one I really ever want it from, darling. Just you."

"You're forgetting something, honey. I'm the guy who clobbered him tonight. He's going to have me taken care of, anyhow."

"Maybe not. Maybe I can stop him. If I go back tonight, I think I can stop him. Not entirely, of course. He'll want something out of you. Something to salvage his pig's vanity. But I can make it something less than death. Then it'll be you and me, Andy, the same as now, and there'll be a thousand nights together to make up for this one."

"Sure. You and me. You and me and Leo."

"We'll find a way to eliminate Leo later on. A safe way. Sometime, somehow, we'll find a way."

I was tired. I was a tired, broke, sick damn fool, but I had no particular desire to die, and I wanted Hilda wholly or on shares, any way I could get her whenever she wanted to come. I leaned back in the seat and said, "You save it for us, honey. I'll be waiting around."

The taxi wheeled into my street and stopped, and I got out and stood beside it on the curb. Hilda leaned out after me, her face lifted above her white, arched throat, and I leaned down and kissed her without touching her with anything but my lips. Then the taxi pulled us apart, and I went inside and upstairs alone.

What do you do with the twenty-four hours that may be your last? Get drunk? Get religion? Go crazy? I guess it depends on who you are, how much that next breath means to you. For what it signifies, I had one drink, one cigarette, and went to bed. I also slept. I slept long and well, and when I woke up I saw by the watch on my wrist that it was far past noon. I got up and oriented, and I didn't feel so good, but I didn't feel so bad, either. Sort of so-so. Sort of like almost any garden variety day. I went into the bathroom and showered and shaved and brushed the fur off my teeth. I dressed and asked myself if I was hungry, and I decided that I wasn't hungry but that I could do with a drink. I had the stuff available, rye and bourbon, but I didn't want a drink alone in the apartment. I wanted a drink in a bar. This seemed a reasonable desire for a guy well into his last time around the clock, so I went out to gratify it.

I got the drink at Stony's. Stony himself poured it for me. He asked me how I was, and I said I was all right. After drinking half of what he'd poured, I almost believed it. Someone in a booth paid a nickel for *Many Times*, which isn't a bad tune in itself, but it started me thinking about Hilda trying to make Leo see that I wasn't worth killing, and that wasn't good. I tried to quit thinking about it, but little details kept forcing their way into my mind which may or may not have been parts of the way it actually happened, so I lifted my drink to finish it, and in the process I saw something that made me think for a moment that it hadn't happened at all. In the mirror behind the bar, I saw a

character named Jack Steap, a thin guy with a body like ten-gauge wire and a face like the edge of a razor. He was a guy for hire who worked for Leo Gall when Leo needed a fast, professional job, and he was standing precisely behind the empty stool on my right. One hand was in the pocket of his coat, very casually. I felt, suddenly, dry and withered inside, all dead and done and ready for the fire.

He said softly in a thin tenor voice, "Okay, hero. Let's go."

I turned on the stool, and it was then that I realized that he hadn't spoken to me at all. His eyes and voice were directed toward the customer on the other side of the empty stool. He'd come in a few minutes after me, and we were now the only ones at the bar. He looked like a college guy. He was wearing a hat, but the hair that showed below it was blond, and I knew it was cut short and square on top. I was a little surprised to see that he still had the price of a drink. Hugh Lawson, I mean.

If he ever recognized me, he didn't show it. He looked over his shoulder at the gungel and said, "You talking to me?"

"You, hero. Let's go."

"What the hell you talking about?"

Jack Steap showed his teeth in a smile that was all on the plane. No depth, no meaning. "You know, hero. Just for kicks, though, I'll brief you on it. I'm talking about your dropping a bundle to Leo Gall last night. I'm talking about your coming back later to reclaim it. It and the other lettuce Leo'd won, plus fifty grand or so he had lying around for household expenses. It was real messy, the way you did it. Smashing his skull that way. Leo's head was a real mess."

Hugh Lawson spun around slowly on his stool. His face had gone white and slack, and the first wash of fear was coming up into his eyes. His voice was a sick croak. "You're crazy! Leo was alive when I left. Kal Magnus and I went together."

"I know. Kal went and stayed. You didn't. You went back."

"I didn't! I swear I didn't!"

"Sure you swear you didn't. But you did. You were seen, hero. You were seen leaving the apartment by someone else who went back. Someone on Leo's team. So

the word went out to Leo's boys. So the boys sent me out to find you. So here I am. And so let's go."

A greenish tinge began to creep into the dead white of Lawson's face. It was the face of a man who knew that nothing he could say would make any difference. His mouth labored to create sound, but the most it managed was a whimper, and his eyes slithered around desperately for help that wasn't there. They crossed my face, his eyes, but I don't think I registered in them. Then he was off the stool and running parallel to the bar. He must have intended to duck around it and out the back way into the alley, but he never made it. Jack Steap's hand came out of his pocket, and there were two muffled detonations so close together that they almost blended, and Hugh Lawson stopped and turned half around and leaned back against the bar like a guy who might have stopped in for a short beer. After a moment, he slipped down to a sitting position and toppled over sideways.

There was a long moment of dead silence in the bar, and then the five or six customers in booths got up and out before the cops got in.

Jack Steap walked down along the bar, stepped over Lawson's body, and went on out the way Lawson had wanted to go.

I went that way myself. I went out into the alley and down the alley to the street and back to my apartment.

I went inside and closed the door and leaned back against it with my eyes closed. Something was hurting inside me, and the hurting was related to the death of Hugh Lawson. He was a guy I hadn't known well and had neither liked nor disliked, but I didn't want him dead at the hands of a thin weasel like Jack Steap for the sake of a fat pig like Leo Gall. Not even when his death was maybe my salvation.

Hilda's voice said, "What's the matter, darling?"

I opened my eyes, and there she was. She was there like something beautiful and warm and real that I needed like hell. I started for her, and she started for me, and we met and merged somewhere between our starting places.

"It's all right, darling," she said. "Leo's dead."

"I know he's dead. So's Hugh Lawson. I just saw him shot down in Stony's place."

"Leo's boys think Hugh's the one who killed Leo."

"I know. That's what the gungel said."

"Don't you see what it means, darling? It means you and me in the open. You and me without a worry. We can go away for awhile. South, I think. Somewhere a long way south of the border."

"Using what for money?"

She broke out of my arms then and went for her purse in a chair. It was a big job, almost as big as an overnight bag, one of these things on a strap that's worn over the shoulder. She picked it up and brought it back and turned it upside down, and paper began to fall out. Green paper. I thought it'd never quit falling. It fell and spread and piled up around my feet.

I raised my eyes to her face, and it was still the loveliest face I'd ever seen, smooth and creamy under copper, with a bright and gifted mouth and smoky eyes.

"You," I said. "You killed Leo and put the finger on Lawson."

She shook her head. "No. I put the finger on Lawson, all right, but I didn't kill Leo."

"Lawson really did, then?"

"No. Neither me nor Lawson."

"Who?"

She looked at me and smiled and said, "You did, darling."

I reached out and took her by the shoulders and dug in. "What the hell's this? I never went back there."

"I know you didn't. Look, Andy. When I was a kid on southside, I used to watch the fellows play ball in the street. One day a kid we called Fats got hit in the head with a bat. He was out for a few minutes, and his head hurt for a while, but pretty soon he started to play again, and it was almost half an hour later when he dropped dead. Concussion acts like that sometimes, and that's the way Leo died. You remember how his head smacked the sharp frame of the sofa? He got up and chased us out, and he got ready for bed, and he dropped dead."

"Wait a minute. The gungel said his head was a mess."

"That was just for looks, darling. He was already dead when I got back. If I'd left him the way I found him, it would've been easy to figure what had really happened."

"So you mess him up and help yourself to his money and finger an innocent guy for the rap."

"For you, darling. For you and me."

"You think I'd touch the lousy money now? Or you?"

"Yes, darling. The money and me. Without us, it's so much paper. With us, it's more fun than you ever dreamed of in that place we'll find below the border."

I kept on looking at her, and I kept on wanting her, in spite of everything, and I told myself that there's a point beyond which you can't go. You can skirt the dark edge, you can do things that later make you sick to your stomach, but there's a point beyond which you can't go if your soul is ever to be your own again. That's what I told myself, and I told myself that I had reached the point.

Now I'll tell *you* something: it's hot down here. It's hot as hell below the border.

THE END

**POINTS SOUTH** is from the collection **Heels Are For Hating and Other Stories** by Fletcher Flora

[AMAZON KINDLE](#) | [FICTIONWISE](#) | IPAD (coming soon)

\$1.99

Jackie Brand is a small-time middleweight boxing professional just barely trying to make ends meet. The week before a fight with one of Jay Paley's boys, he comes home to his wife Peg daydreaming again about her much-coveted motor court out on Highway 66, and guiltily he goes out to have a drink. At the bar, he is met by the competition's manager, and the latter makes a proposal: lose the fight and get paid ten thousand dollars. The amount would actually cover the downpayment for Peg's house, so Jackie decides to accept the offer. But what price will it cost him?

Also includes the stories: *SHE ASKED FOR IT*, *POINTS SOUTH*

