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Author: Dallas McCord Reynolds

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***A gun is an interesting weapon; it can be hired, of course, and naturally doesn't care who hires it. Something much the same can be said of the gunman, too....***

# **GUN FOR HIRE**

**By**

## MACK REYNOLDS

J

OE PRANTERA called softly, "Al." The pleasurable, comfortable, warm feeling began spreading over him, the way it always did.

The older man stopped and squinted, but not suspiciously, even now.

The evening was dark, it was unlikely that the other even saw the circle of steel that was the mouth of the shotgun barrel, now resting on the car's window ledge.

"Who's it?" he growled.

Joe Pranterera said softly, "Big Louis sent me, Al."

And he pressed the trigger.

And at that moment, the universe caved inward upon Joseph Marie Pranterera.

There was nausea and nausea upon nausea.

There was a falling through all space and through all time. There was doubling and twisting and twitching of every muscle and nerve.

There was pain, horror and tumultuous fear.

And he came out of it as quickly and completely as he'd gone in.

He was in, he thought, a hospital and his first reaction was to think, *This here California. Everything different.* Then his second thought was *Something went wrong. Big Louis, he ain't going to like this.*

He brought his thinking to the present. So far as he could remember, he hadn't completely pulled the trigger. That at least meant that whatever the rap was it wouldn't be too tough. With luck, the syndicate would get him off with a couple of years at Quentin.

A door slid open in the wall in a way that Joe had never seen a door operate before. *This here California.*

The clothes on the newcomer were wrong, too. For the first time, Joe Pranterera began to sense an alienness—a something that was awfully wrong.

The other spoke precisely and slowly, the way a highly educated man speaks a language which he reads and writes fluently but has little occasion to practice vocally. "You have recovered?"

Joe Pranterera looked at the other expressionlessly. Maybe the old duck was one of these foreign doctors, like.

The newcomer said, "You have undoubtedly been through a most harrowing experience. If you have any untoward symptoms, possibly I could be of assistance."

Joe couldn't figure out how he stood. For one thing, there should have been some kind of police guard.

The other said, "Perhaps a bit of stimulant?"

Joe said flatly, "I wanta lawyer."

The newcomer frowned at him. "A lawyer?"

"I'm not sayin' nothin'. Not until I get a mouthpiece."

The newcomer started off on another tack. "My name is Lawrence Reston-Farrell. If I am not mistaken, you are Joseph Salviati-Pranterera."

Salviati happened to be Joe's mother's maiden name. But it was unlikely this character could have known that. Joe had been born in Naples and his mother had died in childbirth. His

father hadn't brought him to the States until the age of five and by that time he had a stepmother.

"I want a mouthpiece," Joe said flatly, "or let me outta here."

Lawrence Reston-Farrell said, "You are not being constrained. There are clothes for you in the closet there."

Joe gingerly tried swinging his feet to the floor and sitting up, while the other stood watching him, strangely. He came to his feet. With the exception of a faint nausea, which brought back memories of that extreme condition he'd suffered during ... during what? He hadn't the vaguest idea of what had happened.

He was dressed in a hospital-type nightgown. He looked down at it and snorted and made his way over to the closet. It opened on his approach, the door sliding back into the wall in much the same manner as the room's door had opened for Reston-Farrell.

Joe Prantera scowled and said, "These ain't my clothes."

"No, I am afraid not."

"You think I'd be seen dead wearing this stuff? What is this, some religious crackpot hospital?"

Reston-Farrell said, "I am afraid, Mr. Salviati-Prantera, that these are the only garments available. I suggest you look out the window there."

Joe gave him a long, chill look and then stepped to the window. He couldn't figure the other. Unless he was a fruitcake. Maybe he was in some kind of pressure cooker and this was one of the fruitcakes.

He looked out, however, not on the lawns and walks of a sanitarium but upon a wide boulevard of what was obviously a populous city.

And for a moment again, Joe Prantera felt the depths of nausea.

This was not his world.

He stared for a long, long moment. The cars didn't even have wheels, he noted dully. He turned slowly and faced the older man.

Reston-Farrell said compassionately, "Try this, it's excellent cognac."

Joe Prantera stared at him, said finally, flatly, "What's it all about?"

The other put down the unaccepted glass. "We were afraid first realization would be a shock to you," he said. "My colleague is in the adjoining room. We will be glad to explain to you if you will join us there."

"I wanta get out of here," Joe said.

"Where would you go?"

The fear of police, of Al Rossi's vengeance, of the measures that might be taken by Big Louis on his failure, were now far away.

Reston-Farrell had approached the door by which he had entered and it reopened for him. He went through it without looking back.

There was nothing else to do. Joe dressed, then followed him.

In the adjoining room was a circular table that would have accommodated a dozen persons. Two were seated there now, papers, books and soiled coffee cups before them. There had evidently been a long wait.

Reston-Farrell, the one Joe had already met, was tall and drawn of face and with a chain-smoker's nervousness. The other was heavier and more at ease. They were both, Joe estimated, somewhere in their middle fifties. They both looked like docs. He wondered, all over again, if this was some kind of pressure cooker.

But that didn't explain the view from the window.

Reston-Farrell said, "May I present my colleague, Citizen Warren Brett-James? Warren, this is our guest from ... from yesteryear, Mr. Joseph Salviati-Prantera."

Brett-James nodded to him, friendly, so far as Joe could see. He said gently, "I think it would be Mr. Joseph Prantera, wouldn't it? The maternal lineage was almost universally ignored." His voice too gave the impression he was speaking a language not usually on his tongue.

Joe took an empty chair, hardly bothering to note its alien qualities. His body seemed to *fit* into the piece of furniture, as though it had been molded to his order.

Joe said, "I think maybe I'll take that there drink, Doc."

Reston-Farrell said, "Of course," and then something else Joe didn't get. Whatever the something else was, a slot opened in the middle of the table and a glass, so clear of texture as to be all but invisible, was elevated. It contained possibly three ounces of golden fluid.

Joe didn't allow himself to think of its means of delivery. He took up the drink and bolted it. He put the glass down and said carefully, "What's it all about, huh?"

Warren Brett-James said soothingly, "Prepare yourself for somewhat of a shock, Mr. Prantera. You are no longer in Los Angeles—"

"Ya think I'm stupid? I can see that."

"I was about to say, Los Angeles of 1960. Mr. Prantera, we welcome you to Nuevo Los Angeles."

"Ta where?"

"To Nuevo Los Angeles and to the year—" Brett-James looked at his companion. "What is the date, Old Calendar?"

"2133," Reston-Farrell said. "2133 A.D. they would say."

Joe Prantera looked from one of them to the other, scowling. "What are you guys talking about?"

Warren Brett-James said softly, "Mr. Prantera, you are no longer in the year 1960, you are now in the year 2133."

He said, uncomprehendingly, "You mean I been, like, unconscious for—" He let the sentence fall away as he realized the impossibility.

Brett-James said gently, "Hardly for one hundred and seventy years, Mr. Prantera."

Reston-Farrell said, "I am afraid we are confusing you. Briefly, we have *transported* you, I suppose one might say, from your own era to ours."

Joe Prantera had never been exposed to the concept of time travel. He had simply never associated with anyone who had ever even remotely considered such an idea. Now he said, "You mean, like, I been asleep all that time?"

"Not exactly," Brett-James said, frowning.

Reston-Farrell said, "Suffice to say, you are now one hundred and seventy-three years after the last memory you have."

Joe Prantera's mind suddenly reverted to those last memories and his eyes narrowed dangerously. He felt suddenly at bay. He said, "Maybe you guys better let me in on what's this all about."

Reston-Farrell said, "Mr. Prantera, we have brought you from your era to perform a task for us."

Joe stared at him, and then at the other. He couldn't believe he was getting through to them. Or, at least, that they were to him.

Finally he said, "If I get this, you want me to do a job for you."

"That is correct."

Joe said, "You guys know the kind of jobs I do?"

"That is correct."

"Like hell you do. You think I'm stupid? I never even seen you before." Joe Prantera came abruptly to his feet. "I'm gettin' outta here."

For the second time, Reston-Farrell said, "Where would you go, Mr. Prantera?"

Joe glared at him. Then sat down again, as abruptly as he'd arisen.

"Let's start all over again. I got this straight, you brought me, some screwy way, all the way ... here. O.K., I'll buy that. I seen what it looks like out that window—" The real comprehension was seeping through to him even as he talked. "Everybody I know, Jessie, Tony, the Kid, Big Louis, everybody, they're dead. Even Big Louis."

"Yes," Brett-James said, his voice soft. "They are all dead, Mr. Prantera. Their children are all dead, and their grandchildren."

The two men of the future said nothing more for long minutes while Joe Prantera's mind whirled its confusion.

Finally he said, "What's this bit about you wanting me to give it to some guy."

"That is why we brought you here, Mr. Prantera. You were ... you are, a professional assassin."

"Hey, wait a minute, now."

Reston-Farrell went on, ignoring the interruption. "There is small point in denying your calling. Pray remember that at the point when we ... *transported* you, you were about to dispose of a contemporary named Alphonso Annunziata-Rossi. A citizen, I might say, whose demise would probably have caused small dismay to society."

They had him pegged all right. Joe said, "But why me? Why don't you get some heavy from now? Somebody knows the ropes these days."

Brett-James said, "Mr. Prantera, there are no professional assassins in this age, nor have there been for over a century and a half."

"Well, then do it yourself." Joe Prantera's irritation over this whole complicated mess was growing. And already he was beginning to long for the things he knew—for Jessie and Tony and the others, for his favorite bar, for the lasagne down at Papa Giovanni's. Right now he could have welcomed a calling down at the hands of Big Louis.

Reston-Farrell had come to his feet and walked to one of the large room's windows. He looked out, as though unseeing. Then, his back turned, he said, "We have tried, but it is simply not in us, Mr. Prantera."

"You mean you're yella?"

"No, if by that you mean afraid. It is simply not within us to take the life of a fellow creature—not to speak of a fellow man."

Joe snapped: "Everything you guys say sounds crazy. Let's start all over again."

Brett-James said, "Let me do it, Lawrence." He turned his eyes to Joe. "Mr. Prantera, in your own era, did you ever consider the future?"

Joe looked at him blankly.

"In your day you were confronted with national and international, problems. Just as we are today and just as nations were a century or a millennium ago."

"Sure, O.K., so we had problems. I know whatcha mean—like wars, and depressions and dictators and like that."

"Yes, like that," Brett-James nodded.

The heavy-set man paused a moment. "Yes, like that," he repeated. "That we confront you now indicates that the problems of your day were solved. Hadn't they been, the world most surely would have destroyed itself. Wars? Our pedagogues are hard put to convince their students that such ever existed. More than a century and a half ago our society eliminated the reasons for international conflict. For that matter," he added musingly, "we eliminated most

international boundaries. Depressions? Shortly after your own period, man awoke to the fact that he had achieved to the point where it was possible to produce an abundance for all with a minimum of toil. Overnight, for all practical purposes, the whole world was industrialized, automated. The second industrial revolution was accompanied by revolutionary changes in almost every field, certainly in every science. Dictators? Your ancestors found, Mr. Prantera, that it is difficult for a man to be free so long as others are still enslaved. Today the democratic ethic has reached a pinnacle never dreamed of in your own era."

"O.K., O.K.," Joe Prantera growled. "So everybody's got it made. What I wanta know is what's all this about me giving it ta somebody? If everything's so great, how come you want me to knock this guy off?"

Reston-Farrell bent forward and thumped his right index finger twice on the table. "The bacterium of hate—a new strain—has found the human race unprotected from its disease. We had thought our vaccines immunized us."

"What's that suppose to mean?"

Brett-James took up the ball again. "Mr. Prantera, have you ever heard of Ghengis Khan, of Tamerlane, Alexander, Caesar?"

Joe Prantera scowled at him empty.

"Or, more likely, of Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin?"

"Sure I heard of Hitler and Stalin," Joe growled. "I ain't stupid."

The other nodded. "Such men are unique. They have a drive ... a drive to power which exceeds by far the ambitions of the average man. They are geni in their way, Mr. Prantera, geni of evil. Such a genius of evil has appeared on the current scene."

"Now we're getting somewheres," Joe snorted. "So you got a guy what's a little ambitious, like, eh? And you guys ain't got the guts to give it to him. O.K. What's in it for me?"

The two of them frowned, exchanged glances. Reston-Farrell said, "You know, that is one aspect we had not considered."

Brett-James said to Joe Prantera, "Had we not, ah, taken you at the time we did, do you realize what would have happened?"

"Sure," Joe grunted. "I woulda let old Al Rossi have it right in the guts, five times. Then I woulda took the plane back to Chi."

Brett-James was shaking his head. "No. You see, by coincidence, a police squad car was coming down the street just at that moment to arrest Mr. Rossi. You would have been apprehended. As I understand Californian law of the period, your life would have been forfeit, Mr. Prantera."

Joe winced. It didn't occur to him to doubt their word.

Reston-Farrell said, "As to reward, Mr. Prantera, we have already told you there is ultra-abundance in this age. Once this task has been performed, we will sponsor your entry into present day society. Competent psychiatric therapy will soon remove your present—"

"Waita minute, now. You figure on gettin' me candled by some head shrinker, eh? No thanks, Buster. I'm going back to my own—"

Brett-James was shaking his head again. "I am afraid there is no return, Mr. Prantera. Time travel works but in one direction, *with* the flow of the time stream. There can be no return to your own era."

Joe Prantera had been rocking with the mental blows he had been assimilating, but this was the final haymaker. He was stuck in this squaresville of a world.

Joe Prantera on a job was thorough.

Careful, painstaking, competent.

He spent the first three days of his life in the year 2133 getting the feel of things. Brett-James and Reston-Farrell had been appointed to work with him. Joe didn't meet any of the others

who belonged to the group which had taken the measures to bring him from the past. He didn't want to meet them. The fewer persons involved, the better.

He stayed in the apartment of Reston-Farrell. Joe had been right, Reston-Farrell was a medical doctor. Brett-James evidently had something to do with the process that had enabled them to bring Joe from the past. Joe didn't know how they'd done it, and he didn't care. Joe was a realist. He was here. The thing was to adapt.

There didn't seem to be any hurry. Once the deal was made, they left it up to him to make the decisions.

They drove him around the town, when he wished to check the traffic arteries. They flew him about the whole vicinity. From the air, Southern California looked much the same as it had in his own time. Oceans, mountains, and to a lesser extent, deserts, are fairly permanent even against man's corroding efforts.

It was while he was flying with Brett-James on the second day that Joe said, "How about Mexico? Could I make the get to Mexico?"

The physicist looked at him questioningly. "Get?" he said.

Joe Prantera said impatiently, "The getaway. After I give it to this Howard Temple-Tracy guy, I gotta go on the run, don't I?"

"I see." Brett-James cleared his throat. "Mexico is no longer a separate nation, Mr. Prantera. All North America has been united into one unit. Today, there are only eight nations in the world."

"Where's the nearest?"

"South America."

"That's a helluva long way to go on a get."

"We hadn't thought of the matter being handled in that manner."

Joe eyed him in scorn. "Oh, you didn't, huh? What happens after I give it to this guy? I just sit around and wait for the cops to put the arm on me?"

Brett-James grimaced in amusement. "Mr. Prantera, this will probably be difficult for you to comprehend, but there are no police in this era."

Joe gaped at him. "No police! What happens if you gotta throw some guy in stir?"

"If I understand your idiom correctly, you mean prison. There are no prisons in this era, Mr. Prantera."

Joe stared. "No cops, no jails. What stops anybody? What stops anybody from just going into some bank, like, and collecting up all the bread?"

Brett-James cleared his throat. "Mr. Prantera, there are no banks."

"No banks! You gotta have banks!"

"And no money to put in them. We found it a rather antiquated method of distribution well over a century ago."

Joe had given up. Now he merely stared.

Brett-James said reasonably, "We found we were devoting as much time to financial matters in all their endless ramifications—including bank robberies—as we were to productive efforts. So we turned to more efficient methods of distribution."

On the fourth day, Joe said, "O.K., let's get down to facts. Summa the things you guys say don't stick together so good. Now, first place, where's this guy Temple-Tracy you want knocked off?"

Reston-Farrell and Brett-James were both present. The three of them sat in the living room of the latter's apartment, sipping a sparkling wine which seemed to be the prevailing beverage of the day. For Joe's taste it was insipid stuff. Happily, rye was available to those who wanted it.

Reston-Farrell said, "You mean, where does he reside? Why, here in this city."

"Well, that's handy, eh?" Joe scratched himself thoughtfully. "You got somebody can finger him for me?"

"Finger him?"

"Look, before I can give it to this guy I gotta know some place where he'll be at some time. Get it? Like Al Rossi. My finger, he works in Rossi's house, see? He lets me know every Wednesday night, eight o'clock, Al leaves the house all by hisself. O.K., so I can make plans, like, to give it to him." Joe Prantera wound it up reasonably. "You gotta have a finger."

Brett-James said, "Why not just go to Temple-Tracy's apartment and, ah, dispose of him?"

"Jest walk in, eh? You think I'm stupid? How do I know how many witnesses hangin' around? How do I know if the guy's carryin' heat?"

"Heat?"

"A gun, a gun. Ya think I'm stupid? I come to give it to him and he gives it to me instead."

Dr. Reston-Farrell said, "Howard Temple-Tracy lives alone. He customarily receives visitors every afternoon, largely potential followers. He is attempting to recruit members to an organization he is forming. It would be quite simple for you to enter his establishment and dispose of him. I assure you, he does not possess weapons."

Joe was indignant. "Just like that, eh?" he said sarcastically. "Then what happens? How do I get out of the building? Where's my get car parked? Where do I hide out? Where do I dump the heat?"

"Dump the heat?"

"Get rid of the gun. You want I should get caught with the gun on me? I'd wind up in the gas chamber so quick—"

"See here, Mr. Prantera," Brett-James said softly. "We no longer have capital punishment, you must realize."

"O.K. I still don't wanta get caught. What is the rap these days, huh?" Joe scowled. "You said they didn't have no jails any more."

"This is difficult for you to understand, I imagine," Reston-Farrell told him, "but, you see, we no longer punish people in this era."

That took a long, unbelieving moment to sink in. "You mean, like, no matter what they do? That's crazy. Everybody'd be running around giving it to everybody else."

"The motivation for crime has been removed, Mr. Prantera," Reston-Farrell attempted to explain. "A person who commits a violence against another is obviously in need of medical care. And, consequently, receives it."

"You mean, like, if I steal a car or something, they just take me to a doctor?" Joe Prantera was unbelieving.

"Why would anybody wish to steal a car?" Reston-Farrell said easily.

"But if I *give it* to somebody?"

"You will be turned over to a medical institution. Citizen Howard Temple-Tracy is the last man you will ever kill, Mr. Prantera."

A chillness was in the belly of Joe Prantera. He said very slowly, very dangerously, "You guys figure on me getting caught, don't you?"

"Yes," Brett-James said evenly.

"Well then, figure something else. You think I'm stupid?"

"Mr. Prantera," Dr. Reston-Farrell said, "there has been as much progress in the field of psychiatry in the past two centuries as there has in any other. Your treatment would be brief and painless, believe me."

Joe said coldly, "And what happens to you guys? How do you know I won't rat on you?"

Brett-James said gently, "The moment after you have accomplished your mission, we plan to turn ourselves over to the nearest institution to have determined whether or not we also need therapy."

"Now I'm beginning to wonder about you guys," Joe said. "Look, all over again, what'd'ya wanta give it to this guy for?"

The doctor said, "We explained the other day, Mr. Prantera. Citizen Howard Temple-Tracy is a dangerous, atavistic, evil genius. We are afraid for our institutions if his plans are allowed to mature."

"Well if you got things so good, everybody's got it made, like, who'd listen to him?"

The doctor nodded at the validity of the question. "Mr. Prantera, *Homo sapiens* is a unique animal. Physically he matures at approximately the age of thirteen. However, mental maturity and adjustment is often not fully realized until thirty or even more. Indeed, it is sometimes never achieved. Before such maturity is reached, our youth are susceptible to romantic appeal. Nationalism, chauvinism, racism, the supposed glory of the military, all seem romantic to the immature. They rebel at the orderliness of present society. They seek entertainment in excitement. Citizen Temple-Tracy is aware of this and finds his recruits among the young."

"O.K., so this guy is dangerous. You want him knocked off before he screws everything up. But the way things are, there's no way of making a get. So you'll have to get some other patsy. Not me."

"I am afraid you have no alternative," Brett-James said gently. "Without us, what will you do? Mr. Prantera, you do not even speak the language."

"What'd'ya mean? I don't understand summa the big words you eggheads use, but I get by O.K."

Brett-James said, "Amer-English is no longer the language spoken by the man in the street, Mr. Prantera. Only students of such subjects any longer speak such tongues as Amer-English, French, Russian or the many others that once confused the race with their limitations as a means of communication."

"You mean there's no place in the whole world where they talk American?" Joe demanded, aghast.

Dr. Reston-Farrell controlled the car. Joe Prantera sat in the seat next to him and Warren Brett-James sat in the back. Joe had, tucked in his belt, a .45 caliber automatic, once displayed in a museum. It had been more easily procured than the ammunition to fit it, but that problem too had been solved.

The others were nervous, obviously repelled by the very conception of what they had planned.

Inwardly, Joe was amused. Now that they had got in the clutch, the others were on the verge of chickening out. He knew it wouldn't have taken much for them to cancel the project. It wasn't any answer though. If they allowed him to call it off today, they'd talk themselves into it again before the week was through.

Besides, already Joe was beginning to feel the comfortable, pleasurable, warm feeling that came to him on occasions like this.

He said, "You're sure this guy talks American, eh?"

Warren Brett-James said, "Quite sure. He is a student of history."

"And he won't think it's funny I talk American to him, eh?"

"He'll undoubtedly be intrigued."

They pulled up before a large apartment building that overlooked the area once known as Wilmington.

Joe was coolly efficient now. He pulled out the automatic, held it down below his knees and threw a shell into the barrel. He eased the hammer down, thumbed on the safety, stuck the weapon back in his belt and beneath the jacketlike garment he wore.

He said, "O.K. See you guys later." He left them and entered the building.

An elevator—he still wasn't used to their speed in this era—whooshed him to the penthouse duplex occupied by Citizen Howard Temple-Tracy.

There were two persons in the reception room but they left on Joe's arrival, without bothering to look at him more than glancingly.

He spotted the screen immediately and went over and stood before it.

The screen lit and revealed a heavy-set, dour of countenance man seated at a desk. He looked into Joe Prantera's face, scowled and said something.

Joe said, "Joseph Salviati-Prantera to interview Citizen Howard Temple-Tracy."

The other's shaggy eyebrows rose. "Indeed," he said. "In Amer-English?"

Joe nodded.

"Enter," the other said.

A door had slid open on the other side of the room. Joe walked through it and into what was obviously an office. Citizen Temple-Tracy sat at a desk. There was only one other chair in the room. Joe Prantera ignored it and remained standing.

Citizen Temple-Tracy said, "What can I do for you?"

Joe looked at him for a long, long moment. Then he reached down to his belt and brought forth the .45 automatic. He moistened his lips.

Joe said softly, "You know what this here is?"

Temple-Tracy stared at the weapon. "It's a handgun, circa, I would say, about 1925 Old Calendar. What in the world are you doing with it?"

Joe said, very slowly, "Chief, in the line you're in these days you needa heavy around with wanna these. Otherwise, Chief, you're gunna wind up in some gutter with a lotta holes in you. What I'm doin', I'm askin' for a job. You need a good man knows how to handle wanna these, Chief."

Citizen Howard Temple-Tracy eyed him appraisingly. "Perhaps," he said, "you are right at that. In the near future, I may well need an assistant knowledgeable in the field of violence. Tell me more about yourself. You surprise me considerably."

"Sure, Chief. It's kinda a long story, though. First off, I better tell you you got some bad enemies, Chief. Two guys special, named Brett-James and Doc Reston-Farrell. I think one of the first jobs I'm gunna hafta do for you, Chief, is to give it to those two."

## THE END

**Transcriber's Note:**

This etext was produced from *Analog* December 1960. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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