

Bobo Truck and the Arithmetic Contest

THE OFFICE OF Krieger and Son was on Central Pier, opposite St. James Place. Benny, Goren, and I headed there. On the way, we passed Royce's Shooting Gallery, near Kentucky Avenue: *Ten Shots, 25 Cents, Win a Prize*. Goren wanted to stop there. "What for, Alan?" Benny asked.

"You'll see," was Goren's reply. The shooting gallery was a small open storefront with a counter across the front. There were six .22 caliber rifles chained to the counter. The chains were attached to the muzzle end of the rifle, just long enough to let the shooter raise, aim, and shoot into the gallery, but for safety's sake, too short to allow the rifle to be pointed away from the gallery's interior. Otherwise some crazy might shoot people on the boardwalk. The rear wall of the gallery was covered with targets—wheels, bells, flags, and, most inviting, a continuous line of steel ducks, moving from right to left. The ducks were mounted on hinges. When a duck was struck, it fell down, with a satisfying *clang*. The ducks traveled on an oval track that went across the front of the gallery, then around behind the rear wall, where the knocked-down ducks stood up again, automatically, by passing over a wedge-shaped device alongside the track. They were standing again when they next appeared rounding the curve.

Two shooters were at the counter, firing away. *Bam, clang! Bam, bam, clang! Clang!* Pale blue smoke and the acrid scent of gunpowder filled the air.

Goren directed us to a door that opened into a narrow corridor along the left side of the gallery. We entered and walked twenty feet to a closed door. Goren tapped, two shorts, one long, two shorts. *Tap tap, tap, tap tap.* A small panel opened in the door. Somebody's eyes appeared. Goren announced himself.

"It's me, Alan Goren."

"Who's with you?"

"This is my good friend, Benny James, and this is my nephew, Jack."

The panel closed. The door opened in. We entered a smoke-filled room twenty feet square. There was a counter across the rear with an elevated platform behind it. The center of the room was a seating area—five rows of leather easy chairs, four chairs in each row. Four men stood behind the counter, each with a clipboard and an open cash box. About twenty men lounged in the easy chairs or stood at the counter. The men behind the counter wore radio headsets wired to small radios. The radios seemed to be silent, but evidently the headsets were active. The countermen alternated between taking money, writing on the clipboards, and turning to chalk in numbers on four blackboards across on the wall behind the counter. At the top of each blackboard was a name—Delaware, Suffolk Downs, Arlington, Aqueduct. Each blackboard held rows of chalked numbers, like this:

	<i>Delaware</i>	
1: 5-2-4	\$11.40	\$9.70
2: 1-3-5	\$8.20	\$7.00
3: 2-4-3	\$12.30	\$10.50

Along the left wall was a buffet table with a coffee urn, three large platters of sandwiches, and three large platters of small cakes and cookies. Two cops in uniform leaned against the wall, coolly, arms folded across their chests, studying us through watchful eyes. The floor was heavily carpeted. The sounds of the boardwalk and the shooting gallery were audible, but muffled. All the men in the room spoke softly. The room was filled with the low murmuring sound of hushed conversations.

“What is this place?” I asked.

Benny answered me. “It’s a bookie joint. Those blackboards are the four tracks running today. The first is Delaware. The first three races are over. In the first race, the Number 5 horse won, the Number 2 horse placed. That means it came in second. The Number 4 horse showed. That means it came in third. The winning horse paid \$11.40 for a two-dollar bet. This joint paid \$9.70. Looks like they discount about fifteen percent. Evidently, this joint does not take place and show bets.”

“These men,” he indicated the twenty or so men seated or milling about the center of the room, “are customers. The cops are ... cops. I guess this is the place where all the numbers money is collected, too.”

“What are the numbers?” I asked.

“Tell you later.”

Goren picked up one of the racing forms that were stacked at the end of the counter. He eased into one of the leather easy chairs to study the form.

A door opened behind the counter. Two men emerged. One was carrying a heavy adding machine, which he set down at the left end of the counter. The other man was obviously someone of importance. All who were seated rose out of their chairs, as if a

judge entered a courtroom, as if someone called out *All rise*. Everyone greeted him. A chorus of *Hello, Bobo*. Bobo was a big man; he looked powerful. He had slicked-back jet-black hair, dark eyes, smooth face, rosy cheeks. He wore white trousers and a colorful long-sleeved silk shirt, open down to the third button. He had a massive neck, with a thick gold chain and a heavy gold cross. He smiled and raised his right hand in greeting. "Hello, fellas."

He spread the fingers on his raised hand and slowly lowered his arm, like a prince, signifying it was OK to be seated in his presence. He addressed the two cops specifically. "Hello, boys. How's everything?"

"OK, Bobo," they responded.

"Good. Good. Don't forget to give my regards to the Lieutenant."

"Sure, Bobo."

Bobo's eyes swept the room. He nodded to each customer and murmured his name. "Rudy," he nodded. "Fred, Jim." Each customer replied with a smile. "Hello, Bobo."

Bobo acknowledged Goren. "Hello, Alan."

Goren responded, "Hello, Bobo."

Bobo's eyes stopped at me and Benny. "And these fellows over here?" he asked, to no one in particular, without taking his eyes from us.

Goren rose out of his chair and came to us. "They are with me, Bobo," he said. "This is my good friend, Benny James, and this is my nephew, Jack."

"*Tch, tch*, Alan," Bobo shook his head, negatively, side to side. "This over here is not a place to bring guests. Don't do it again."

"They're OK, Bobo," Goren apologized.

“OK, Alan,” Bobo clapped Goren on his upper arm, twice, with a wide smile. “OK for now, but no more. Unless,” he said, looking at Benny, “you want some action.”

“Sure, Bobo. Can I buy a number?”

“Not in here, Benny. They’s places outside for that.”

“OK, Bobo, I’ll try the next race at Aqueduct.”

“Right over there, Benny,” Bobo put his arm around Benny and pointed to the Aqueduct blackboard. “I’m Bobo Truck, Benny. Nice to meet you.”

“A pleasure, Bobo,” Benny gave Bobo the big Benny James grin. You could see its effect on Bobo. He smiled back at Benny.

“See ya ’round, Benny James.” He was committing the name and face to memory.

Benny left us to pick up a racing form. He went to consult with Goren.

Bobo addressed me. “And what do you do, Jack?”

“I work for Mr. Krilow. I help the demonstrators. Benny is one of my bosses.”

“How old are you, son?”

“I’m fifteen.”

“Go to school, do you?”

“I’m starting high school in September.”

“Good. Good. Get an education.” He started to turn away.

At that moment, the man who brought in the adding machine took off one of the pages from the Delaware clipboard and began to add the numbers. He was fast on the machine. *Plink, plink, crank! Plink, plink, crank! Plink, plink, crank!*

Bobo half-turned, half-faced me, “See that, Jack?” Bobo said. “That is Sammy Beck over here. He is the fastest man on an

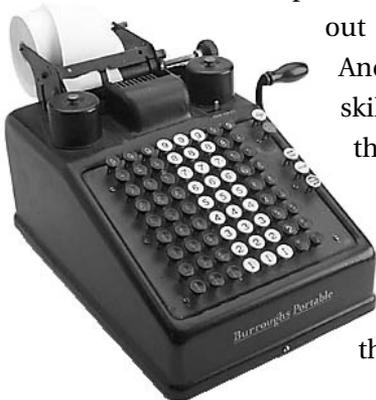
adding machine in this town, maybe in the whole country. Look at him go.”

Sammy Beck sure was fast. His right hand flew, up the keyboard, then *crank!* He never looked at the machine. His eyes were fixed on the rows of numbers on the paper. His left hand went down the column, number by number as he entered each into the machine, and then cranked.

The 1939 state-of-the-art adding machine was a Burroughs hand-cranked machine with vertical banks of keys and a printout adding machine tape. Each bank had ten keys, numbered from bottom to top from 0 through 9. The number of banks of keys determined the size (in digits) of the individual numbers that could be added, and the number of digits in the total. For example, in a machine with eight banks of keys, you could input a number as large as 999,999.99 and receive a printout on the adding machine tape up to a total of one additional digit, like 9,999,999.99.

As with any machine, practice and training improved the performance of the operator. A skillful operator, like a skillful typist, could operate the adding machine rapidly, without concentrating on the keyboard.

And, unlike an ordinary user, a really skilled operator worked his way up the banks of keys from the lowest individual digit to the highest individual digit, while the ordinary user worked the keyboard from left to right, regardless of the size of the individual digits.



For example, inputting the number \$814.73: The ordinary user punches in, from left to right, an 8, a 1, a 4, a 7, and lastly, a 3, then *cranks*. The skilled operator, on the other hand, punches in the digits, from lowest to highest, in their respective banks, first the 1 in the fourth bank from the right, then the 3 in the first bank on the right, then the 4 in the third bank, then the 7 in the second bank, lastly the 8 in the fifth bank, then *cranks*. The skilled operator's hand moves less, because his hand moves up the keyboard once for each number entered while the ordinary operator's hand moves up and down the keyboard, from left to right, seeking out the digit that belongs in each bank.

A good operator not only moves up the keyboard from the lowest digit to the highest digit, he does it without looking at the keyboard. A really good operator is many times faster than an ordinary user. Regular use of the machine makes for speed and accuracy. The occasional user is somewhat of a groper. It is like the difference between an excellent touch-typist whose fingers fly over the keys without looking versus a hunt-and-peck typist who has to look and find each letter.

"I bet Benny is faster," I said, only half-aloud. I was really talking to myself.

Bobo turned back to me.

"What's that, son?"

Uh-oh. I didn't even realize I had spoken.

"What did you say, Jack?" He asked again.

"Nothing ... really," I stammered.

"Yes, you did. You said you bet Benny is faster on the machine than Sammy over here."

"No, Mr. Truck. I said I bet Benny is faster. He doesn't need the machine."

Bobo pulled back in surprise. “What are you saying, son? That your Benny could add up that whole page of numbers without a machine? Faster than Sammy over here?”

Boy, was I in it. A few men overheard Bobo and drifted toward us. Goren approached.

“What is happening, Jack?” he asked.

“I didn’t mean anything,” I said. “I was talking to myself. I said Benny could add faster than that man with the machine.”

Bobo called to Benny. “Hey, Benny James, c’meah. Didja hear what your pal Jack over here said about you?”

Benny smiled, “What? That I’m great with the girls?”

“Well, I can believe that. You’re a good-looking dude, that’s for sure.” Bobo laughed and slapped Benny’s back. “No, Benny,” he said. “Your friend over here said, to use his exact words, he *bet* you are faster *without a machine* than Sammy over here. He used the word *bet*. The magic word. He didn’t say maybe you’re as fast, or he thinks you *might be* as fast. He said he *bet* you’re as fast.”

Benny turned to study Sammy Beck. He studied him the way a prizefighter studies his opponent in action. Sammy Beck was really fast. I felt terrible. What kind of a mess did I make? Benny asked if he could see a sheet. Bobo moved to the counter. He picked up a clipboard, removed a sheet, and handed it to Benny. There were about sixty numbers on the sheet, in a column—mostly two-digit numbers, like \$36, \$74, a few three-digit numbers, like \$150. They were all whole dollar amounts, no pennies.

Benny closed his eyes. He was counting Sammy’s cranks. After about twenty seconds, he opened his eyes, and looked at me. “Jack,” he said, with his biggest grin, “you are going to get me in trouble. This guy is really fast! I don’t know. He is fast!”

“OK, Benny, forget it. I’m sorry,” I said. I addressed Bobo. “I didn’t mean anything, Mr. Truck. I’ve seen Benny add numbers. He *is* fast. I was just wondering out loud, that’s all.”

Benny interrupted me. “Wait a second, Jack.” He turned to Bobo. “Tell you what, Bobo. I’ll bet ten bucks. What’ll you lay me? How about 5–1? Your man is *real* fast.”

“No odds, Benny James,” Bobo said with a smile. “But I’ll tell you what. If you win, I’ll buy you and your friends dinner at Trucci’s. That’s my place.”

“It’s a deal,” Benny offered his hand on it. Bobo grasped it and pumped it vigorously.

Goren spoke up to the crowd that had gathered around. “I’ve got twenty bucks here on Benny. Anybody want it?” Five men said *yes* in unison. “Tell you what,” Goren said. “I’ll lay you each ten. OK?”

Benny drew Goren aside. “Alan, you don’t even know me. What are you doing?”

“I have a good feeling about this,” was Goren’s reply. I had suspected Goren was a mystic. Now I knew I was right.

“All right, now,” Bobo called out. “Bets go over here on that counter. Sammy, finish off that sheet. Don’t start another until I tell you. Benny, I have a stopwatch here. Do you want to go first?”

Benny answered, “You don’t need the stopwatch. I see there is a carbon paper and a carbon copy sheet. I’ll take the carbon copy. Sammy can have the original. We’ll start together. Whoever finishes first.”

“Are you sure you wanna do it that way?” Bobo asked.

“Yes, Bobo. Just as long as the carbon copy is clear.”

“OK, Benny, you get up behind the counter, next to Sammy over here, and I’ll check out the carbon copy for you.”

So Bobo arranged the match. It was obvious he was enjoying himself. He cleared away about six feet of the left side of the counter. "You will stand here, Sammy. Benny, you over here. Here, I put the sheets over here face down on the counter. When I say *start*, you guys will turn over your sheets and start adding. OK?"

"I need a pencil," Benny said.

One of the men behind the counter handed Benny a yellow pencil.

"Do you want to try it out?" Bobo laughed. He was having such a good time.

Benny laughed at Bobo's joke. It looked like Benny was also having a good time.

Bobo spread his arms, his back to the counter. He walked toward the crowd. By now, everyone in the room was pressing forward to watch the contest.

"Everybody back," Bobo said, "give them room." He cleared away a ten-foot space in front of the counter. "You guys," he said to the other men behind the counter. "Come on out from behind."

"But, Bobo, we'll miss the results."

"OK, then," Bobo said. "You're right. You fellows move all the way to the right. Write the results on a piece of paper. Don't put them on the board until this is over. We don't want to distract the ... the ... *contestants* over here!" He laughed again. Bobo went to the clipboard at the right end. He opened it and took out the bottom two sheets—the original and the carbon copy. He studied the carbon copy.

"Benny James," he said, "I'm lookin' to see that the carbon is clear. I don't want you hollerin' *foul* that the numbers are too faint or anythin'. It looks OK to me. Do you wanna see a different carbon sheet? I don't want you bellyachin' later on over here."

"If you say it's OK, that's good enough for me." Again, the big grin. Benny looked just like when he is about to start a demonstration. I half-expected him to clap his hands and call out, "OK, folks, step right up here. This is gonna be somethin' to see!" He didn't look anxious at all. I, on the other hand, was pretty near trembling with apprehension that Benny should be shamed and all because of me.

Bobo arranged the pages, face down. He stood back. "I'm gonna count down from ten. Then, I will say *start*. That's when you pick up the papers over here. If either of you jump the gun, you lose automatically. Agreed?"

"Yes, Bobo," Sammy said. It was the first time he'd spoken.

"Sure, Bobo," Benny said, completely relaxed, his hands resting easily, face down on the counter.

Bobo started the count. "Ten. Nine. Eight." The room became silent. The only sound was the distant sound of the shooting gallery, muffled by the walls in between.

"Two. One. *START!*"

The contestants reached for the papers and turned them over. Sammy began to work the machine. He was a wonder. *Plink, plink, crank! Plink, plink, plink, crank!* His right hand flew up the keys and to the crank, then up the keys again and to the crank. Watching Sammy Beck was like watching an engine at work.

Benny held his right hand palm down, on the paper. His hand moved down the paper, smoothly. I measured Benny's progress down the paper against Sammy's. Benny was going down the paper faster! Much faster! Almost twice as fast. He was doing it effortlessly. He looked at ease. He wore a half-smile. He might just as well have been reading the morning paper. Oh, boy! Benny is doing it! I couldn't believe it, how fast he went down that column

of numbers. He was at the bottom! Sammy's left hand was only three-quarters down the page, his right hand still flying over the keys and crank. Benny picked up the pencil and wrote down a number. He set down the pencil. He won! I was elated. But wait! He started over. He placed his palm down at the top of the page again and started down the column a second time. What was he doing? Checking his answer? He went down the page much quicker this time. Benny reached the bottom a second time. He picked up the pencil and as he started to write again, Sammy shouted, "Done! I'm done!"

Benny finished writing a second later.

"Wait a second, Bobo," Benny said, "I had the answer before Sammy hollered *done*. All I was doing was writing it down."

"You lose, Benny James," Bobo said. "Good show, but you lose. Sammy over here edged you out by a half a second."

"Well, I don't agree," Benny's smile was a little thin, "but you're making the rules, Bobo. OK, I concede."

As everyone crowded forward to congratulate Sammy, Benny suddenly clapped his hands. Two quick claps. "Wait up, everybody. Let's compare the answers. Here's mine: 3,176. What's yours, Sammy?"

"I get 3,212."

"Hold everything," Benny sang out. "If Sammy's answer is wrong, he can't be the winner."

Silence for a moment.

Bobo spoke up. "Of course. The answer has to be right. Maybe yours is wrong, Benny James."

"Maybe they're both wrong," somebody in the crowd called out.

"Tell you what," Benny said. "I'll bet a hundred bucks I'm right and he's wrong."

Like a shock wave, silence fell on the room. Bobo studied Benny through narrowed eyes. When he narrowed his eyes that way, his expression lost that look of good-natured openness. A shadow of menace passed over his face, only for a second. Then the smile returned. You could see that he smelled a scam. But he dismissed the idea almost as quickly as it came.

Bobo was first to speak. "Benny," he said, "you are *somethin'*! You're on."

"How 'bout some odds, Bobo?" Benny asked with that innocent grin.

"No odds, Benny James. If you win a hundred from me, you'll be a celebrity in this town. That's enough."

"A hundred and ten, Bobo. Don't forget the first ten bucks."

Bobo laughed again, "Sure, Benny, a hundred and ten. I'll tell you what. I like your style. Dinner at Trucci's on me, win or lose. With your friends." Another vigorous handshake. "Now then," said Bobo, "how do we do this?"

Goren spoke up. "Hold it, Bobo. I'll put another hundred on Benny. Anybody?"

Bobo answered before anyone could speak up. "Me, Alan, I cover you," he said with a broad smile.

"OK," Bobo repeated himself, "now how we gonna do this?"

"Easy," said Benny. "Let somebody read off the numbers and you check them on the adding machine tape."

So Bobo called over one of the cops and handed him the paper. The cop read out the numbers while Bobo checked them off on the adding machine tape. Halfway down the cop called out 137.

Bobo said, "Stop. The tape says 173."

"That's the mistake," Benny said. "A difference of thirty-six dollars. I am right. Sammy's tape is thirty-six dollars too much. I win."

Bobo was puzzled. He picked up a pencil and paper. Laboriously, he wrote and calculated. He struggled for almost five minutes. Finally, he looked up. "Benny James is right. Benny is the winner!"

Pandemonium! Everybody in the room was talking at the same time, and all moving toward Benny. I was so excited, I thought I was going to cry. Benny came to me and threw his arms around me. He hugged me.

"Why did you add it twice?" I asked. "Were you checking your answer?"

"Not at all, Jack. The first time, I only added the first two digits columns on the right, like fifty-three and twelve and thirty-eight. The second time, I added the hundreds column. There weren't many of them. Then I added them together."

Here came Alan Goren. "I knew it was good luck when I met Zena and you guys. Benny, you are a genius! I can't believe what you did. How did you do it? You have to teach me. We are going to make a fortune in cocoa."

Bobo approached. "Here's your money, Benny James. And yours, Alan. This is the first bet I ever lost that I didn't mind to lose. You're some guy. We are gonna do somethin' together over here. Meanwhile, you three are my guests at Trucci's. C'mere, Georgie," he called to the doorman. "I'll let you know when. Georgie here will tell you when. Where will he find you?"

"At Krilow's Kitchen Gadgets," Benny said.

"Kitchen Gadgets? Whattaya do there? The boy says you are a demonstrator. Are you a pitchman?"

"Yep, that's what I do."

"You can do better. You'll hear from me."

I picked up the paper that Bobo used to find out if Benny's answer was correct. Here is what it said, after a number of false starts and cross-outs:

$$\begin{array}{r}
 \text{regent number} \quad 137 \\
 \text{Sammy's tape} \quad 173 \\
 \hline
 \text{Sammy too much} \quad 36 \\
 \hline
 \\
 \text{Sammy's total} \quad 3212 \\
 \text{Sammy's mistake} \quad -36 \\
 \hline
 \text{Benny's number} \quad 3176 \quad \text{OK}
 \end{array}$$

I folded it and slipped it into my pocket. I kept it as a souvenir. I still have it.

As we turned to leave, Benny waved to the room. "So long, everybody. Come see me at Krilow's on Virginia Avenue," he laughed.

"So long, Benny. Take it easy, Benny. You're something, Benny." A chorus of good-byes.

We were almost at the door when the Aqueduct man called out, "Hey, Goren, Alan Goren. Hey, Benny James, wait a second. Your horse won at Aqueduct!" Benny had backed Goren's pick.

"Is this something, or what!" exclaimed Goren. "I haven't had a winner in this place since March. Benny, you are my lucky piece. Tell me how you did that trick."

“It ain’t me, Alan. I don’t *do* anything. The numbers come into my head by themselves. It’s a gift,” Benny laughed. He threw his arm around my neck and pulled me to him. “It’s Jack. He’s the lucky one.”