



Too Many Women

A Nero Wolfe Mystery

Rex Stout

ARCHIE GOES TO WORK

One good glance and I liked the job. The girls. All right there, all being paid to stay right there, and me being paid to move freely about and converse with anyone whomever, which was down in black and white. Probably after I had been there a couple of years I would find that close-ups revealed inferior individual specimens, Grade B or lower in age, contours, skin quality, voice or level of intellect, but from where I stood at nine-fifty-two Wednesday morning it was enough to take your breath away. At least half a thousand of them, and the general and overwhelming impression was of—clean, young, healthy, friendly, spirited, beautiful and ready. I stood and filled my eyes, trying to look detached. It was an ocean of opportunity.

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Too Many Women

by Rex Stout



A Nero Wolfe Mystery



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IT WAS THE same old rigmarole. Sometimes I found it amusing; sometimes it only bored me; sometimes it gave me a pronounced pain, especially when I had had more of Wolfe than was good for either of us.

This time it was fairly funny at first, but it developed along regrettable lines. Mr. Jasper Pine, president of Naylor-Kerr, Inc., 914 William Street, down where a thirty-story building was a shanty, wanted Nero Wolfe to come to see him about something. I explained patiently, and about Wolfe being too lazy, too big and fat, and too much of a genius, to let himself be evoked. When Mr. Pine phoned again, in the afternoon, he insisted on speaking to Wolfe himself, and Wolfe made it short, sour, and final. An hour later, after Wolfe had gone up to the plant rooms, just to pass the time I dialed the number of Naylor-Kerr, Inc., managed to get through to Mr. Pine, and asked him why he didn't come to see us. He snapped that he was too busy, and then he wanted to know, "Who are you?"

I told him I was Archie Goodwin, the heart, liver, lungs, and gizzard of the private detective business of Nero Wolfe, Wolfe being merely the brains. He asked sarcastically if I was a genius too, and I told him no indeed, I was comparatively human.

"I could run down now," I said.

"No." He was curt but not discourteous. "I'm filled up for today. Come tomorrow morning at ten o'clock. Better make it ten-fifteen."

Those pyramids of profit down in the Wall Street section, sticking straight up nine hundred feet and more, are tenanted by everything from one-room midgets to ten-floor super-giants. Though the name of Naylor-Kerr, Inc., was vaguely familiar to me, it was not a household word, and I lifted the brows when I learned from the lobby directory that it paid the rent for three whole floors. The executive offices were on the thirty-sixth, so up I went. The atmosphere up there was of thick carpets, wood panels and plenty of space, but as for the receptionist, though she was not really miscast she was way past the deadline, having reached the age when it is more blessed to receive than to give.

She received me at ten-fourteen, and at ten-nineteen I was escorted down a corridor to the office of the president. Naturally he had a corner room with batteries of big windows, but he had to admit that in spite of more panels and carpets and the kind of office furniture you see in Sloane's window, it gave me the impression of a place where somebody got some work done.

Mr. Jasper Pine was about the same age as the receptionist, a little short of fifty maybe, but on him it looked good. Except for his clothes, with the coat obviously cut for the stoop on his shoulders, he had more the appearance of a foreman or a job boss than a top executive of a big corporation. In the middle of the room he shook hands as if he were comparatively human too, and, instead of fencing himself off behind his desk, assigned us to a couple of comfortable chairs between two windows.

"My morning's a little crowded," he told me in a deep voice that sounded as if all it needed was more breath to reach Central Park, and he could furnish the breath when necessary. I was sizing him up, not knowing then whether the job was a lead pencil leak in the supply room, which would have been beneath our notice, or wife-tailing, which was out of bounds for Nero Wolfe. On the phone he had refused to specify.

"So," he was going on, "I'll sketch it briefly. Looking over some reports recently, I noticed that our employee turnover here in the home office, exclusive of the technical staff, was over twenty-eight per cent for the year nineteen forty-six. That was excessive. I decided to look into it. As a first step I had a form drawn up and two thousand copies of it multigraphed, and I sent a supply of it to all heads of departments, with instructions that one be filled out for each person who had left our employ during nineteen forty-six. The forms were to be returned direct to me. Here's one that came from the head of the stock department." He extended a hand with a paper in it. "Take a look at it. Read it through."

It was a single sheet, letter size, with a neat job of multigraphing on one side. At the top he said:

RETURN TO THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT BY MARCH TENTH

The blank spaces had been filled in with a typewriter. First came the name of the employee, which in this case was Waldo Wilmot Moore. Age: 30. Unmarried. Home address: Hotel Churchill. Employment began: April 8, 1946. Hired through: Applied personally. Jo

Correspondence checker. Salary: \$100 weekly. Rises: To \$150 weekly September 30, 1946.
Employment ended: December 5, 1946.

Other spaces had been filled in, about how well he had done his job, and his relations with other employees and his immediate superiors, and so forth, and then at the bottom came what was of course the key question. Reason for ending employment (give details). There were three inches of space after it, plenty of room for details, but for Waldo Wilmot Moore only one word had been thought necessary and there it was:

Murdered.

So apparently it wasn't a lead pencil leak.

I looked at Jasper Pine. "An excellent idea," I said enthusiastically. "These reports will show you where the weak spots are, and you can take steps. Though Moore's case was probably an exception. I don't suppose many of the twenty-eight per cent got murdered. Incidentally, I keep track of murders for business reasons, and I don't remember this one. Was it local?"

Pine was shaking his head. "Moore was run over by a car, a hit-and-run driver—here in New York somewhere uptown. I believe that is called manslaughter, not murder, which requires malice aforethought. I'm not a lawyer, but I looked it up when this report—when I saw this." He made a gesture of impatience. "The hit-and-run driver was not found. I wanted Nero Wolfe to find out if there is any basis for the supposition that it was murder."

"Just curiosity?"

"No. I took it up with the head of the stock department, who made that report, because he didn't think it desirable to have it in our files, stating that one of our employees had been murdered, unless that was actually the case. Also I wanted to know what reason he had, if any, to make that statement. He refused to give any reason. He agreed with my definition of murder and manslaughter, but he refused to change the report or to make another report using a different word or phrase. He insisted that the report is correct as it stands. He refused to elaborate. He refused to discuss it."

"Goodness." I was impressed. "That ought to be a record. Four refusals to a corporation president from a mere head of a department! Who is he? Mr. Naylor? Or Mr. Kerr?"

"His name is Kerr Naylor."

I thought for a second he was injecting comic relief, but the look on his face showed me quite the contrary. He was taking time out to light a cigarette, and it was easy to see that the purpose of the maneuver was to hide embarrassment. The president was unquestionably embarrassed.

After a good puff he coughed explosively and explained, "Kerr Naylor is the son of one of the founders of this business. He was named Kerr after the other founder. He has had a—uh—varied career. Also he is my wife's brother. He actually controls a large block of the corporation's stock, but he no longer owns it because he gave it away. He refuses to be an officer of the company, and he refuses to serve on the Board of Directors."

"I see. He's a dyed-in-the-wood refuser."

Pine made the gesture of impatience again. He did it with a little fling of a hand, and it was abrupt but not domineering. "As you see," he said, "the situation is not simple. After Mr. Naylor's refusal either to justify the report or to change it, I was inclined just to let the matter drop and merely destroy the report, but I mentioned it to two of my brother executives and to a member of the Board, and they were all of the opinion that it should be followed up. Besides that, news of the report, with that word on it, has got around among the employees of the department, presumably through the stenographer who typed it, and there is a lot of unhealthy gossip. This man Moore was the type—I'll put it this way—he was the type that stirs up gossip in the circle he lives in, and now, nearly four months after his death

here he is stirring it up again. We don't like it and we want it stopped."

"Oh. You said you wanted Mr. Wolfe to find out if there was any basis for using the word murdered. Now you want the gossip stopped. You'd better pick which."

"It amounts to the same thing, doesn't it?"

"Not necessarily. If we find out he was murdered and the finding percolates, the gossip gauge will go right through the ceiling, not to mention other possible results."

Pine glanced at his wristwatch, reached to an ash tray to ditch his cigarette, and stood up. "Damn it," he said, with more breath but not more noise, "do I have to explain that the situation is made more complicated by the fact that it was Mr. Kerr Naylor who signed the report? This is a damn nuisance and it's taking my time that ought to be spent working! His father, old George Naylor, is still living and is Chairman of the Board, though he turned over his stock to his children long ago. This is the oldest and largest company in its field, the largest in the world, and it has built up a reputation and a tradition. It has also built up—unavoidable—complexities. The directors and executives now managing its affairs—of whom I am one—want this thing looked into, and I want to hire Nero Wolfe to do the looking."

"You mean the corporation? Wants to hire him?"

"Certainly!"

"To do what? Wait a minute, can I put it this way? We're either to make that word on the report good, or we're to make this Mr. Kerr Naylor eat it. Is that the job?"

"Roughly, yes."

"Do we get credentials for around here?"

"You get all reasonable co-operation. The details will have to be arranged with me. Most time gone. It will have to be handled with discretion—and delicately. I had an idea that the way to do it would be for Nero Wolfe to get a job in the stock department, under another name of course, and he could—what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Excuse me." I stood up. The notion of Wolfe fighting his way down to Wall Street every morning or even with me driving him, and punching a time clock, and working all day in the stock department, had been too much for my facial control.

"Okay," I said, "I guess I know enough to put it up to Mr. Wolfe. Except about money. I ought to warn you that his charges have not joined in the postwar inflation because the rates were already so high that a boost would have been vulgar."

"This company never expects good work for low pay."

I told him that was fine and got my hat and coat.

A coolness had sprung up between Wolfe and me. These coolnesses averaged about four weeks, say, a couple of hundred a year. This particular one had two separate aspects: first, my natural desire for him to buy a new car opposed to his pigheaded determination to wait another year; and second, his notion of buying a noiseless typewriter opposed to my liking for the one we had.

It happened that at that moment there were other coolnesses swirling around in the old brownstone house, on West Thirty-fifth Street not far from the Hudson River, which he owned and used both for a residence and an office. Four of us lived there, counting him, and we were all temporarily cool. Wolfe had somewhere picked up the idea of putting leaves of sweet basil in clam chowder, and Fritz Brenner, the cook and house manager, strongly disapproved. A guy in New Hampshire who was grateful to Wolfe for something had sent him an extra offering, three plants of a new begonia named Thimbleberry, and Wolfe had given them good bench space up in the cool room, and Theodore Horstmann, the plant nurse, who thought that everything that grew except orchids was a weed, was fit to be tied.

So the atmosphere around the place was somewhat arctic, and on my way down in the elevator the thought struck me that this Naylor-Kerr or Kerr Naylor or Pine-Kerr Naylor business might be used as an excuse to go somewhere out of the cold for a few days. Why couldn't it be me who got a job in the stock department? Grabbing a taxi from under the chins of two other prospective customers, I considered it. Just any job, one that happened to be loose, didn't seem practical. A little friendly conversation with the elevator starter had informed me that the line of Naylor-Kerr, Inc., was Engineers' Equipment and Supplies, and I knew all of nothing about them except maybe overalls. Anyway, the job would have to be one that would let me roam around and rub elbows, or it might take months, and I didn't want months. It would be hard enough to maneuver Wolfe into letting me try it for a week since he needed me every hour and might need me any minute, for anything and everything from opening the mail to bouncing unwanted customers or even shooting one, which had been known to happen.

Liking the idea, and being afraid of the dark when it comes to anything resembling murder, I told the taxi driver I had had a vision and asked him to go to the address of the Homicide Squad on West Twentieth Street. There by good luck I found that Purley Stebbins, my favorite sergeant, was on hand, and he obligingly got what I wanted with only three or four growls. A phone call to a brother sergeant downtown brought the information that the death of Waldo Wilmot Moore had occurred around midnight on December 4. The body had been discovered by a man and wife on Thirty-ninth Street a hundred and twenty feet east of Eleventh Avenue. The wife had phoned in while the man stood by, and a radio car had arrived on the scene at one-nineteen A.M. on Decem-5. It was a DOA, dead on arrival, with Moore's head crushed and his legs broken. The car that hit him had been found the next morning, parked on West Ninety-fifth Street near Broadway. It was hot, having been stolen the evening of the fourth from where it was parked on West Fifty-fourth Street. Its owner had been checked up and down and backwards and forwards, and was out of it. No witness

to the accident had been found, but the post-mortem report, plus laboratory examination of various particles clinging to the tires and fender of the stolen car, had satisfied everybody as to what had happened. It was filed as a routine hit-and-run and was still open. After the phone call Purley went through a door, and came back in a couple of minutes and told me that Homicide still had it and was working on it.

“Yeah,” I grinned at him, “I can imagine it—conferences, minute clues subjected to severe scrutiny, ten of your best men turning over stones all the way—”

Purley pronounced a word. Having granted my slightest wish, he sneered, “Come and talk to my desk and do it. Now give. Who’s your client?”

I shook my head. “About that noise you use for a voice, I know how you got it. Your mother had a longing for nutmeg graters when she was carrying you. It might be, say, an insurance company.”

“Nuts. No insurance company pays Nero Wolfe prices. Who invited you in?”

“Nothing for now.” I got erect. “Somebody had a dream, that’s all. If and when anything for the teeth is brought on, we’ll see that you get a bite. Much obliged, and give my love to your boss.”

But I had a chance to do my own love-giving. On my way out there he was, striding from the entrance, Inspector Cramer himself, concentrated and in a hurry.

He saw me, stopped short, and demanded, “What do you want?”

“Well, sir,” I said pleadingly, “I thought with my experience if you had a vacancy anywhere, I’d be willing to start as a patrolman and work my way—”

“Natural-born clown,” he said personally. “Is it the Meredith case? Has Wolfe crashed the gate—”

“No, sir, Mr. Wolfe would regard that as impertinent. As he was saying only yesterday, never Mr. Cramer—”

He was on his way. I looked reproachfully at his broad manly back and then headed for the street.

Seated at my desk in the office, I put the phone back in the cradle and told Nero Wolfe, “The bank says that Naylor-Kerr is good for anything up to twenty million.”

Wolfe, seated behind his own desk, heaved a sigh and then was silent. I had given him the story complete, in a dry factual manner with no flavor or coloring on account of the coolness previously mentioned. His inclination, naturally, was to turn it down, since he was always annoyed at any hint of a prospect that he might have to use his brain, but I doubted if I would have to ride him hard on this because it looked like easy money and we could always use it.

He sighed again.

I spoke, still dry. “I suppose the best bet is that Pine killed Waldo Wilmot Moore himself and is keeping up appearances. What for being unknown to us, but surely not to everybody. Anyway, we would be paid by the corporation, not him. His suggestion that you get a job in the stock department under another name shows that he has given the problem a great deal of thought. You could call yourself Clarence Camembert, for instance, or Percy Pickerel. If they gave you too much to do you could bring things home and I’d be glad to help. They could pay you by weight—say, a dollar a pound a week. As you stand now, or at least stand close to three hundred and forty pounds, it would come to an annual salary—”

“Archie. Your notebook.”

“Yes, sir.” I got it and flipped to a new page.

“A letter to Mr. Pine, president and so on. Mr. Goodwin has reported his conversation this morning with you. I accept the job of investigating, on behalf of your company, the death of your former employee, Waldo Wilmot Moore. It is understood that the purpose of the investigation is to establish, with satisfactory evidence, the manner of his death—whether by accident or by the deliberate action, with intent, of some person or persons. The job does not, as I understand it, extend to the disclosure of the identity of the murderer—if there was a murder—nor to procurement of proof of guilt. Should such extension be desired, you may notify me. Paragraph.

“The procedure promising quickest results, I think, will be for you to put Mr. Goodwin on the company payroll as a personnel expert. You can plausibly explain his presence as a part of your campaign to reduce your employee turnover. Thus he can spend his days there, moving freely about and conversing with anyone whomever, without causing comment or increasing the gossip you deplore. I suggest that you make his salary two hundred dollars weekly. Paragraph.

“My fee will of course be determined by the amount of time spent on the case and the amount and kind of work required. No guarantee is given. No retainer is necessary unless you prefer it that way, in which case the check should be for two thousand dollars. Sincerely.”

Wolfe, who always straightened up to some extent to dictate, leaned back again. “After lunch you can go down and give that to him.”

If I had been cool before I was a glacier now. “Why lunch?” I demanded. “Why should I eat?”

“Why not?” His eyes went open. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Not a thing. But what I start I like to finish, and this may take weeks. There are one or two other little matters that need attention around here, and there’s a bare possibility that you may find it slightly inconvenient when you buzz me or call me or grunt at me, and you do on an average of ten times an hour, and I’m not here. Or, perhaps, that hadn’t occurred to me, perhaps you’re figuring on a replacement?”

“Archie,” he murmured. His murmur is Wolfe at his worst. “I agree with someone, I forgive who, that no man is indispensable. By the way, you may have noticed that I suggested the same salary as you receive from me. You can either endorse their checks over to me for deposit in my bank, and take my checks weekly as usual, or just keep their checks as you pay, whichever is simpler for your bookkeeping.”

“Thank you very much.” I made no attempt to speak further. His deliberate use of the plural, checks, instead of check, three times, therefore got exactly the effect he intended it to. I got out paper and carbon and inserted them, and started on the typewriter in a way that left no possible doubt whether it was noiseless or not.

Coolness.

I started work as a personnel expert for Naylor-Kerr, Inc., the next day, Wednesday morning, March 19, the next to last day of winter.

I knew just what I had known after my first call on Pine, and no more. Tuesday afternoon when I took him Wolfe's letter, he was co-operative about letting me ask questions, but he couldn't supply many answers. He liked Wolfe's idea on procedure, and proved he was a good executive by starting immediately to execute. That was simple. All he had to do was call in an assistant vice-president, introduce me, tell him about me, and instruct him to put me on the payroll and present me personally to all heads of departments. That was accomplished Tuesday afternoon, the presentations being made in the office of the assistant vice-president to which the department heads were summoned. I found an opportunity to drop the remark that after looking over the reports and records I thought I would start in the stock department.

Wednesday morning I was on the job in the stock department on the thirty-fourth floor. It was handed me a surprise. I had vaguely supposed it to be something on the order of a cluttered, overgrown hardware store, with rows of shelves to the ceiling containing samples of things that hold bridges together and related objects, but not at all. Primarily, as far as space went, it was a room about the size of the Yankee Stadium, with hundreds of desks and girls sitting at them. Along each side of that area, the entire length, was a series of partitioned offices, with some of the doors closed and some open. No stock of anything was in sight anywhere.

One good glance and I liked the job. The girls. All right there, all being paid to stay right there, and me being paid to move freely about and converse with anyone whomever, which was down in black and white. Probably after I had been there a couple of years I would find that close-ups revealed inferior individual specimens, Grade B or lower in age, contours, skin quality, voice, or level of intellect, but from where I stood at nine-fifty-two Wednesday morning it was enough to take your breath away. At least half a thousand of them, and the general and overwhelming impression was of—clean, young, healthy, friendly, spirited, beautiful, and ready. I stood and filled my eyes, trying to look detached. It was an ocean of opportunity.

A voice at my elbow said, "I doubt very much if there's a virgin in the room. Now if you come to my office ..."

It was Kerr Naylor, the head of the stock department. I had reported to him on arrival, and he had arranged, and he had introduced me to a dozen or so of his assistants, heads of sections. And but two of them were men. One of them I had regarded with special interest was the head of the Correspondence Checking Section, since Waldo Wilmot Moore had been a correspondence checker, but I was careful not to give him any extra time or attention there at the start. His name was Dickerson, he could easily have been my grandfather, and his eyes watered. I gathered from our brief talk that the function of a correspondence checker was to mosey around, pounce and grab a letter when the whim seized him, take it to the checker's office and give it the works on content, tone, policy, style, and mechanical execution. So it could safely be assumed that his popularity quotient around the place would be about the same as that of an MP in the army, and that was bad. It presented the possibility that any letter

dictator or stenographer in the department might have felt like murdering Moore, including those who had lost their jobs—and the turnover had been twenty-eight per cent. For one man to sort out the whole haystack, a straw at a time, was not my idea of the pursuit of happiness, but it did have its good points as suggested above.

Kerr Naylor's office was also a corner room, but was considerably more modest in every respect than the president's, two floors up. One whole wall was behind ceiling-high filing cabinets, and there were piles of papers around on tables and even two of the chairs. After we were seated, him at his desk and me at one end of it, I asked him:

"Why do you refuse to hire virgins?"

"What?" Then he tittered. "Oh, that was just a remark. No, Mr. Truett, this office has no prejudice against virgins. I merely doubt if there are any. Now how do you want to begin?"

His voice matched his appearance. The voice was a thin tenor, and while he was not a pygmy they had been all out of large sizes the day he was outfitted. Also they had been long on pigments. His skin had no color at all, and the only thing that made it reasonable to suppose there was anybody at home inside it was the eyes. They too were without color, but they had a sharp dancing glint that wasn't just on the surface but came from behind, deep.

"This first day," I said, "I guess I'll just poke around and get my directions straight. No virgins at all? Who has picked all the flowers? You might as well call me Pete. Everybody does."

The name I had chosen to be introduced by was Peter Truett, liking the implication of the first syllable of the Truett. Pine had thought my own, Archie Goodwin, might be familiar to someone. I went back to virgins again because I wanted to keep the talk going to get acquainted with this bird. But apparently it had really been just a remark and the virgins question had not come to a boil in him, as it often does with men over fifty, for he ignored it and said:

"As I understand it you are going to study the whole employee problem, past, present, and future. If you want to start with a specific case and spread out from there, I suggest the name of Waldo Wilmot Moore. He was with us last year, from April eighth to December fourth—correspondence checker. He was murdered."

The glint in his eyes danced out at me and went back in again. I kept my own face under control, in spite of his splashing it out like that, but it is only natural and proper for anyone to betray a gleam of interest in murder, so I let one show.

My brows went up. "Gosh," I said, "no one told me it had gone that far. Murdered? Right here?"

"No, no, not on the premises, up on Thirty-ninth Street at night. He was run over by a car. His head was smashed flat." Mr. Naylor tittered, or maybe it wasn't a titter but only a nervous untwisting somewhere in the network. "I was one of those requested to come and identify him, at the morgue, and I can tell you it was a strange experience—like trying to identify something you have known only as a round object, for instance an orange, after it has been compressed to make two plane surfaces. It was extremely interesting, but I wouldn't care to try it again."

"Could you identify him?"

"Oh, certainly. There was no question about that."

"Why do you say murdered? Did they catch the guy and hang it on him?"

“No. I understand that the police regard it as an accident—what they call a hit-and-run.”

“Then it wasn’t murder. Technically.”

Naylor smiled at me. His neat little mouth wasn’t designed for anything expansive, but was certainly meant for a smile, though it went as quick as it came. “Mr. Truett,” he said, “we are to work together we should understand each other. I am rather perceptive, and would probably surprise you to know how much I understand of you already. One little fact about me, I have always been a student of languages, and I am extraordinarily meticulous about my choice of words. I detest euphemisms and circumlocutions, and I am acquainted with all the verbs, including those of the argots, which mean to cause the death of. What did I say happened to this man Moore?”

“You said he was murdered.”

“Very well. That’s what I meant.”

“Okay, Mr. Naylor, but I like words too.” I had a strong feeling that no matter what the reason had been for tossing this at me right off the bat, if I fielded it right I might at least end the inning, and possibly the game, that first morning. I tried. I grinned at him. “I have always been fond of words,” I declared. “I never got worse than B in grammar, clear to the eighth grade. Not that it’s any hide off of me, but since we’re speaking of words, when you say Moore was murdered I take it to mean that the driver of the car knew it was Moore, wanted him dead or at least hurt, and aimed the car at him. Doesn’t it come down to that?”

Naylor was looking up at the wall behind me. His eyes stayed that way, with no glint showing because they were upraised, until I twisted my neck to see what he was looking at. All that was there was a clock. I untwisted back to him, and his gaze came down to my level.

He smiled again. “Twenty minutes past ten,” he said resentfully. “I understand, Mr. Truett, that Mr. Pine has hired you to survey our personnel problems. What do you think he would say if he knew you were sitting here at your ease, prolonging a discussion of a murder which has no possible connection with your job?”

The damn little squirt. The only satisfactory way to field that one would have been to pick him up and use him for a dust rag. Under the circumstances that satisfaction would have to be postponed. I swallowed it, stood up, and grinned down at him.

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m a great talker. It was nice of you to listen. Why don’t you put through a voucher in triplicate, or however you do it, docking me for an hour? I deserve it, I really do.”

I left. If the “uh, complexities” that Pine had mentioned included a desire on the part of his brother executives and him to tie a can to Kerr Naylor’s tail, I was all for it. He sure was tricky and mean. He had me so sore that I went from his office straight to the main arena and took a random course through the labyrinth of desks, glancing in all directions at faces, shoulders, and arms, and took my time picking one who had probably been a Powers model and got fired because she made all her colleagues look below standard.

I sat on the corner of her desk and she looked up at me with the clear blue eyes of an angel and a virgin.

I leaned to her. “My name is Peter Truett,” I told her, “and I’ve been hired as a personnel expert. If your section head hasn’t told you about me ...”

“He has,” she said, in a sweet musical voice, a contralto, which is my favorite.

“Then please tell me, have you heard any gossip recently about a man named Moore? Waldo Wilmot Moore? Did you know him when he worked here?”

She shook her head. "I'm awfully sorry," she said, sweeter than before if anything, "but only started here day before yesterday, and I'm leaving on Friday. Just because I can't spell! never could spell." Her lovely fingers were resting on my knee and her eyes were going straight to my heart. "Mr. Truman, do you know of any job where you don't have to spell?"

I forget exactly how I got away.

I had been assigned a room of my own, about the right size for an Irish setter but not big enough for a Great Dane, about midway of the row of offices that ran along the uptown side of the arena. It contained a cute little desk, three chairs, and a filing cabinet with a lock which I had been given the key. Apparently there were nothing but shanties across the street since the window had space outside, and if you took it at a slant there was a good view of the East River.

I went there and sat.

It seemed I had breezed into something with insufficient consideration of strategy and tactics. As a result I had already pulled two boners. When Kerr Naylor had unexpectedly jumped the gun by shoving Moore and murder at me, I should have shrugged it off as a matter with a single-track stomach and no appetite for anything but personnel problems. And when he side-stepped and caught me off balance, I should have backed clear up and looked it over instead of getting peeved and spilling Moore's name to a vision of delight that couldn't spell. My reaction was too exuberant.

On the other hand, I certainly didn't intend to spend a week or so just getting myself established as a personnel expert. I sat there through two cigarettes, thinking it over, and then went and unlocked the filing cabinet and got out a couple of the folders I had stowed there. On one of them the tab said STOCK DEPARTMENT—STRUCTURAL METALS SECTION, and on the other STOCK DEPARTMENT—CORRESPONDENCE CHECKERS SECTION. With the folders under my arm, I emerged to the arena, crossed it by a main traffic aisle, and knocked at the door of an office on the other side. When a voice told me to come in I entered.

"Excuse me," I said, "you're busy."

Mr. Rosenbaum, the head of the Structural Metals Section, was a middle-aged, bald-headed guy with black-rimmed glasses. He waved me on in.

"So what," he said without a question mark. "If I ever dictated a letter without being interrupted I'd lose my train of thought. No one ever knocks around here, you just bust in. Sit down. I'll ring later, Miss Livsey. This is the Mr. Truett mentioned in that memo we sent around. Miss Hester Livsey, my secretary, Mr. Truett."

I was wondering how I had ever missed her, even in that colossal swarm outside, until it struck me that a section head's secretary probably had her own room. She was not at all spectacular, not to be compared with my non-speller, but there were two things about her that hit you at a glance. You got the instant impression that there was something beautiful about her that no one but you would ever see, and along with it the feeling that she was in some kind of trouble, real trouble, that no one but you would understand and no one but you could help her out of. If that sounds too complicated for a two-second-take, okay, I was there, and I remember it distinctly.

She went out with her notebook and I sat down.

"Thanks for letting me horn in," I told Rosenbaum, taking papers from the folder. "It won't take long. I just want to ask a few general questions and one or two specific ones about the reports. You people have certainly got this thing organized to a T, with your sections and

subsections. It must simplify things.”

He agreed that it did. “Of course,” he added, “it gets mixed up sometimes. I’m Structural Metals, but right now I’ve got thirty-seven elephants in stock, over in Africa, and I can’t go to any other section to take them. My basic position is that elephants are nonmetallic. I may have to go up to Mr. Naylor to get rid of them.”

“Hah.” I said triumphantly, “so that’s where your stock is, Africa! And elephants. I’ve been wondering. With that settled, let’s tackle personnel. Speaking of which, I noticed that your secretary, Miss Livsey, didn’t seem to be wading through bliss. I hope she’s not quitting too?”

That proved she had had that effect on me as described, my going out of my way to mention her name, with no reason at all.

“Bliss?” Rosenbaum shook his head. “No, I guess she isn’t. The man she was engaged to died a few months ago. Got killed in an accident.” He shook his head again. “If it’s a part of your job to make our employees happy, I’m afraid you won’t get to first base with Miss Livsey. She’s a damn good secretary too. If I had that hit-and-run driver here I’d—do something to him.”

“I’d be glad to help,” I said sympathetically. I riffled the papers. “The man she was engaged to—is he among these? Did he work here?”

“Yes, but not in my section. He was a correspondence checker. It was an awful blow for her, and she stayed away—but here I go again, you’re not here to listen to me gab. What are your questions, Mr. Truett?”

Since I had quit being exuberant I decided not to press it, only it did seem that wherever I went I met Waldo Wilmot Moore. We got down to business. I had questions ready that I thought were good enough to keep me from being spotted as a phony, and I stayed with him for a good twenty minutes, which seemed ample for the purpose.

Then I went down the line to the office of the head of the Correspondence Checking Section. The door was standing open and he was there alone.

Grandpa Dickerson was by no means too old or too watery-eyed to know the time of day. As soon as the preliminary courtesies had been performed and I had sat down and got the folder opened, he inquired, perfectly friendly:

“I’m wondering, Mr. Truett, why you start with me?”

“Well—you’re not the first, Mr. Dickerson I’ve just had a session with Mr. Rosenbaum. Incidentally, there’s a special problem there: are elephants personnel?”

But he wasn’t having light conversation. “Even so,” he said, “I have the smallest number of employees of any section in the department. Only six men, whereas other sections have up to a hundred. Also, I have had no turnover for nearly eight years, except one case, a man who got killed and was replaced. I’m quite willing to co-operate, but I really don’t see what you can do with me.”

I nodded at him. “You’re perfectly right—from where you sit. From the standpoint of general personnel problems you’re out. But your section is something special. Everybody in the place regards your six men as dirty lowdown snoops, and you’re the Master Snoop.”

It didn’t freeze him. He merely nodded back at me. “How do you propose to change that?”

“Oh, I don’t. But it certainly ties it in with personnel difficulties. For instance, the man who got killed. Don’t you know there has been talk around that his death wasn’t an accident?”

“Nonsense! Talk!” He tapped on his desk blotter. “Look here, young man, are you

intimating that the functioning of this section has been the cause, directly or indirectly, of the commission of a crime?"

"Yes."

His jaw trembled, and then came open and hung open. I was restraining myself from taking my handkerchief and wiping his eyes.

"That's not the way to put it," I said with emphasis, "but it was you who put it that way. I would say it more like this, that the talk about that man's death is certainly one of the personnel problems around here, and Mr. Naylor himself suggested that I might use it as one of my starting points. Do you mind my asking a few questions about him? About Moore?"

"I resent any insinuation that the operation of this section has resulted in any injustice or that it has been the cause of any legitimate desire to retaliate." His jaw was back under control.

"Okay. Who said anything about legitimate? Desires to retaliate come in all flavors. But about this Moore, how did he rate with you? Was he a good worker?"

"No."

"No?" I was matter-of-fact. "What was wrong with him?"

The old man's jaw trembled again, but it didn't come open. When he had it in hand he spoke. "I have been in charge of this section ever since it started, over twenty years ago. Last April I had five men under me, and I regarded that as adequate. But a new man was hired and I was told to put him to work. He was incompetent, and I so reported, but my report was ignored. We had to put up with him. On several occasions his mistakes would have discredited the section if we had not been alert. It made it harder for all of us."

I thought to myself, my God, here we go again. I was trying to get started narrowing down, and here were six more added to the list, Dickerson himself and five loyal checkers who might have been irritated into killing Moore for the honor of the section. No, not everybody was in except Kerr Naylor himself.

"But," I objected, "what about the hiring regulations? I understand there is no over-all personnel control and each department head rolls his own in theory, but in practice the section heads have the say. Who hired Moore and saddled you with him?"

"I don't know."

"How could you help knowing?"

Dickerson used his own handkerchief on his eyes, which relieved the tension a lot for me. I hoped he would keep the handkerchief in his hand, but he deliberately and neatly returned it to his pocket.

"This," he said, "is a very large concern, the largest in the world in its field, and beyond all comparison the best. Naturally the authority is tightly organized. No one on this floor is more superior except the head of the department, Mr. Kerr Naylor, the son of one of the founders. Therefore any exercise of authority can be brought to bear on me only through Mr. Naylor."

"Then it was Naylor who hired Moore?"

"I don't know."

"But it was Naylor who said you needed another man and wished Moore on you?"

"Certainly. The line of authority is as I have described it."

"What else can you tell me about Moore besides his incompetence?"

"Why, nothing." Dickerson's look and tone indicated that he regarded my question as silly. Obviously, if a man was incompetent that settled it; nothing else about him mattered or

way or another. But it appeared that he was willing to concede that even a competent man must eat. He pulled a watch from his vest pocket, looked at it, and stated, "My lunch hour starts at twelve, Mr. Truett."

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