

I

It was in early February that we received news from Scotland Yard that Harry and I had solved the murder of Arden Coombs. Mr. Noakes, from the British Consulate, delivered the letter himself.

This was just six weeks after a Mr. Leverton, of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, visited the apartment, twice. Both times he spoke with my mother, who was visiting for Christmas. Of course I had no way of knowing there *was* a Mr. Leverton of the Pinkerton Detective Agency when I wrote of him, so it was all a little embarrassing and I was glad to have missed his calls.

That story had upset Harry more than I could have imagined. I knew he wasn't at all fond of the Pinks, but it wasn't until then that I realized the depth of his animosity. Naturally, I couldn't tell the story as exactly as it had transpired without compromising the privacy of our friends, the Ketchums. But Harry was right to point out that Leverton could just as easily have been an operative for Drummond's Detective Agency, or Newcome's, etc.

To placate him I set out to find a story that put the Pinks in a bad light. With the help of a man at the offices of the *Eagle*, I found just the thing. It had occurred in August, just before Harry had brought me to Brooklyn. Jacob Worth, a prominent political leader of the city, had had his watch stolen while attending the races at Brighton Beach. What made the story so absolutely priceless was that he was in the company of his close friend Robert Pinkerton, "the great detective." I wrote this up and showed it to Harry and he was overwhelmed by my gift. I suspect the new typewriter he presented me at Christmas was a sort of reward for furthering the cause that clearly meant so much to him, and not the acknowledgement of my development as a writer that he alleged. But if the periodic abusing of the Pinkertons is all it takes to content a husband, enough at least for him to overlook my small indiscretions, it seems a small price to pay.

I've strayed a bit from my explanation of Mr. Noakes's visit and shall go back to the beginning, the birth of M. E. Meegs. It began, at least in part, out of economic necessity. Harry and I were newly married and his business was slow. Harry is an insurance investigator, of sorts, and at that time was working by the job. But the interval between jobs could be long. And we had had a small setback, financially, while visiting recently in Glens Falls.

To be perfectly honest, I was partly responsible for the loss. But nearly every plunger at the track that day was likewise whipsawed by the infamous Searchlight. And I feel justified in

pointing out that if you were to tot up my four days of gains against my one day of losses, you would see I am a net winner on the turf. Nonetheless, there is no arguing the fact that the loss in Glens Falls was untimely.

When we returned to Brooklyn, I resolved to take a hand in earning the family's bread. It had been my goal to become a writer since I was a freshman at college. Now I felt I had both the blessing of time and the incentive of looming poverty. Harry had mentioned a friend who made a living as a writer of dime novels so I thought I would pay the gentleman a visit and ask his advice. I wrote this Mr. Ulmer with just the town as an address and received a very friendly invitation in reply.

Harry was to be away for a week, so I decided this was the time to strike. I left the apartment just after Harry and used the money he had given me to put toward the grocer's account to buy a ticket on the Long Island Railroad. It was a rather long train ride out to Good Ground and when I disembarked there was no one else about. The directions Mr. Ulmer had sent didn't correspond particularly well with the configuration of streets before me, so I stopped in a small grocer's. The proprietor said he knew exactly where the Ulmers' cottage was and provided me with directions that bore no resemblance at all to Mr. Ulmer's. After an hour of trudging about various country lanes, I found the Ulmers' cottage.

I was greeted by the Ulmers' eleven-year-old daughter, a girl of remarkable poise. Mrs. Ulmer was busily typing a manuscript that needed to make the evening mail and after welcoming me, in a very friendly manner, she returned to work. There were two other children and Mr. Ulmer, who was writing the manuscript just as his wife was typing it. The youngest child, who could have been no more than five or six, had the task of relaying the handwritten pages from his father to his eldest sister, who would quickly scan them for errors, and from her to his mother. The middle child, a little girl of seven or eight, lay on the floor with a large dictionary and would look up words when called upon by her parents or sister.

I had a very pleasant conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Ulmer, during which time neither of them paused from their work for more than a moment. Mr. Ulmer informed me that while the demand for dime novels and the nickel weeklies was quite steady, he wasn't sure he would recommend the field to a newcomer, as the meager pay per page necessitated the hectic conditions I was witnessing. He told me he had received a letter from a British agent in New

York who was looking for news stories of a sensational nature to be sent back to Britain for publication.

“Perhaps you would find that work rewarding?” he offered.

“I’ve never written for a newspaper,” I confessed. “Only short fictional pieces.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter,” he assured me. “They’d be going to England, or Wales.... The readers there would never know if they were true or not. All that matters is that they be sensational. And short. You know the thing: ‘by telegraph from our New York correspondent.’”

“You mean I could just sort of make things up?” I asked.

“Why not?” Mrs. Ulmer pointed out. “That’s what the papers here do.”

She had a lovely laugh, and the whole household seemed quite happy in its work. Mr. Ulmer found me the agent’s card and offered to sell me his old typewriter for four dollars. It was an ancient thing, but it did seem to work, as long as you typed slowly. Much more slowly than Mrs. Ulmer’s pace. I paid him out of the money Harry had given me to pay the butcher.

Then Mrs. Ulmer asked Celeste, the eldest girl, to walk me to the station so I wouldn’t become lost. It was only after both her parents assured her that they would be extra vigilant during her absence that she agreed to do so.

I asked Celeste if she enjoyed working with her parents and if she didn’t miss playing with other children. It was, after all, a sort of literary sweatshop, though I didn’t use that term. She said the frantic pace I had witnessed lasted only three or four days. Then the family spent several days together picnicking at the beach, reading, and putting on shows for each other.

I inquired about which books she most enjoyed and I mentioned titles I had read as a girl. She wasn’t familiar with any of them. But she had read all of Austen and the Brontës and most of Dickens and George Eliot, and proceeded to mention a dozen others—three of whom were unknown to me. When she asked me which novels I had read, I tried, with increasing desperation, to come up with titles with which she was unfamiliar. I was on the point of inventing an author when she came to my rescue. She said that if I had been to college, as I had mentioned, I must have read in Latin. I lied shamelessly and told her that nothing had thrilled me so as Caesar’s discourse on the three parts of Gaul.

When we reached a point where the station was in view, she said good-bye and returned to her editorial duties at full charge. We had shared the burden of the typewriter until then, and I found it quite unwieldy carrying it on my own. By the time I reached the station, I was fairly

exhausted. When I disembarked at the Flatbush Avenue station, I realized there was no way I could negotiate my way on the street car with my load. I couldn't bear the thought of walking the ten blocks to the apartment, so instead hired a cab with the last fifty cents of the butcher's money.

The next day, I visited the Manhattan office of Baily & Sackett. It was only Mr. Sackett, really, in a small office he rented from a larger firm. He greeted me enthusiastically and like Mr. Ulmer assured me my lack of experience would not be an encumbrance. He explained that he would receive my stories and then try to place them in various publications throughout Great Britain. The only one he mentioned specifically was the *Pall Mall Gazette*. I would be paid for each placement, after he had deducted a small fee for his services. He said I could write about whatever I wished, but to keep in mind that the more sensational the better. As an example, he said a fire in a tenement was all well and good, but a fire in a tenement where a brave fireman climbs through flames to reach a baby mislaid by her mother, and then escapes by balancing the child on his head as he jumps from roof to roof would be much more the thing. He suggested I should aim for between two hundred and fifty and five hundred words, as anything longer would be much harder to place.

I was very excited and rushed back to Brooklyn to begin a story I had already conceived. But first, I needed to purchase a new ribbon for the typewriter, and then spent most of the rest of the day cleaning the well-worn keys. Much of the next morning was given up to the creation of an appropriate pen name. I finally settled on M. E. Meegs. "M. E." for the phonetic connection to Emmie, and Meegs simply because it sounded like the name of a Fleet Street hack.

This brings me to the story that prompted the visit from Mr. Noakes, of the British Consulate. But before I begin, I need to explain a little about what happened in Buffalo. Put simply, my uncle had been leading a double life, faked his death, twice, and then was gunned down in Toronto. Harry and I solved that case, back in early August, and in a way, I suppose, it led to our marriage. But my original explanation for my uncle's disappearance was that he had been killed by confederates in a ring of opium smugglers. And that they had then staged a yachting accident while keeping his body submerged in the Erie Canal. When the body had deteriorated enough that the cause of death could no longer be determined, they would make it appear as if it had washed up on the lake shore, several months after the supposed accident.

The Birth of M.E. Meegs — Robert Bruce Stewart

I must admit, I was genuinely disappointed when it turned out otherwise. But now I was free to write an account of the crime as it *should* have transpired. In fact, my version was much more befitting of Mr. Sackett's requirements than the too-prosaic truth.

It took no time to write a story of the appropriate length, and I brought it to Mr. Sackett the first thing Monday morning, August 27th. He was very pleased with it and thought he would have no trouble placing it. I asked what that would pay and he said one and six, in British currency of course. I wasn't entirely sure what that translated to in dollars, and yet I didn't want to appear ignorant by asking. So, on the way home, I stopped at the library and learned that one British pound was equal to almost five dollars, and six shillings was another dollar and fifty cents.

~~ *end of sample* ~~

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