

I

This is an account of a decidedly odd set of events which occurred during the spring of 1902. It involved not one mystery, but four. Or, perhaps more correctly, three mysteries and a conundrum—which was, at first, masquerading as a mystery. I had just finished what I felt was my finest literary effort to date, an account of the famed European jewel thief Madame B_____.

It's no exaggeration, nor mere conceit, to say this was a tale worthy of Dumas. For in addition to filching the gems of noblewomen, Madame B_____ also made off with a good many noble hearts. She quite regularly had dukes, counts, and earls dueling over her fickle affections. And enough baronets groveled before her that her boots need never to have touched the ground—a great convenience during the winter months.

The piece was finished in late February. In truth, it had been completed two weeks before, but the damned parrot that Harry, my husband, bought me for Christmas had managed to eat a good part of my manuscript and left the results on the remainder. However, now restored, my work was at last ready for the publisher.

And had I a publisher there would have been no need to visit Mr. Sackett, of Baily & Sackett, Literary Agency. Mr. Sackett (there was, in fact, no Mr. Baily) had placed some articles of mine in English periodicals the previous year. They had achieved a certain recognition, particularly in the county of Lancashire, and I was sure he would welcome the opportunity of marketing my new work. His office was just at the Manhattan end of the bridge, right on Park Row—the Fleet Street of New York. I dropped my manuscript off with him on a Thursday and returned, as instructed, on Monday. Mr. Sackett had read my piece and pronounced it a masterpiece, though perhaps not in so many words.

“Then you think you can find a publisher? *The Strand*, possibly?” I asked.

“Yes, possibly. But what the magazines most want are serials, something that entices the reader to buy the *next* issue. Then, later, we can find a book publisher.”

“Oh, I already have plans for just such a book, *The Queens of Criminality*. It would serve as a companion to Lady Carbury's *Criminal Queens*. I was imagining that each profile would appear sequentially in some magazine of note.”

“Ah, an admirable aspiration,” he said. “But the key to a successful serial is that no installment be finite. For instance, the Madame B____ piece should end with the hint that her true identity will be revealed at the beginning of the next installment.”

“But I don’t reveal her true identity.”

“Quite. However, you do know it?”

“Yes, but I’m pledged never to reveal it.”

“Mrs. Reese, if you wish to get anywhere in this game, you must be willing to make compromises. I’m sure your promise was sincere when you made it, but circumstances change.”

“It isn’t merely a matter of honor. If I were to break my word, I would fear for my safety, and yours, Mr. Sackett.”

I knew he thought I was being overly dramatic, but if I’d related to him the truth of Madame B____’s nature, I felt sure he’d want nothing to do with my project. Finally, he suggested that the piece end with the promise that the great woman’s identity would be revealed in the next installment, and that we leave off worrying about the resolution until the time came. I agreed, and told him I would begin work on the next queen of criminality. My intended subject was Sophie Lyons, the notorious blackmailing seductress of the previous century. Much had been written about Mrs. Lyons, so I only needed to liven it up with detail and color to come up with my next installment.

Just a week or so after visiting Mr. Sackett—having finished a wonderful, if somewhat fanciful, portrait of Mrs. Lyons—I found myself at loose ends. One Sunday afternoon, for want of something more purposeful, I attended an outing organized by a fellow alumna of my college. Like myself, the others were all recent graduates. And then there was Fanny. Fanny Baum had entered with my class back in ’95, but after a year of struggle—during which she had learned little beyond the fact that Latin and Greek were two separate and distinct languages—Fanny surrendered to the inevitable and gave up her academic ambitions. However, she found college life quite agreeable otherwise. She persuaded her very wealthy father to make arrangements of some sort so that she was allowed to stay on in one of the houses. She was given some silly title, “social coordinator,” I believe, but no real duties. Fanny attended chapel every morning, sang with the glee club, and kept herself popular by hosting innumerable bunny parties. Bunny being Welsh rabbit, as ambrosia to the gods to college women of my era.

We were taking a cruise up the Hudson and on the way back Fanny more or less forced her company on me. We had known each other only remotely in school. I didn't even know her real name, nor did I ever see any reason to learn it. Fanny seemed such a fitting moniker for one so thick-headed.

"Did you know I'd married?" she asked.

"No. Congratulations, Fanny."

"Oh, it's over now," she said without emotion. "I hear you live out in Brooklyn, Emmie."

"Yes, we have an apartment just above the park."

"I heard it's a rather large place."

"Certainly for the two of us," I told her.

The conversation proceeded in this desultory way until Fanny confided that her interest in our living arrangements was motivated by the fact she was not getting along with her father and hoped to find temporary rooms until she could set up house for herself. I didn't like the manner in which she had maneuvered me into offering her accommodations, but I did so nevertheless—for three reasons. First, we did have a large apartment with two bedrooms sitting empty. Second, Harry was out of town quite a bit of the time and Fanny, whatever her faults, did offer diversion.

But the primary reason was *Psi*. This was a literary journal of her former husband's which she had taken possession of in the divorce settlement. Actually, it was the mere conception of a journal. It was meant to be one of the little magazines, like *The Chap-Book*, or *The Lark*. But the staff had never managed to publish even a single issue.

"Was it a matter of money?" I asked.

"Oh, we had plenty of that. Or too much. My husband and his friends spent so much time discussing the thing—over endless dinners and what they called symposia—that they never had time left for working. He told me there was no use starting the thing until they had the decadence down pat."

"But then what is it you have?"

"Oodles of paper, mostly. In a warehouse somewhere. And there's a cute little hand press."

On hearing this, I issued an immediate, and most gracious, invitation. This was the answer to any writer's dreams: a press, plenty of paper, and a wealthy dupe living in the next room. With these three things, I would be released from the tyranny of publishers and their petty

demands. Still, there was one small matter of concern. What Fanny had neglected to mention was the reason for the disharmony in her father's house. That would be Fanny's manservant, Michel.

Formerly her husband's valet, Michel was another of her prizes from the divorce. It was unremarkable that her father had objected to the arrangement. A young woman with a man acting as her chambermaid invited rumors. And when the woman was as well known as Fanny for her many infatuations, and the servant as pleasing to the eye as Michel, the rumors quickly progressed to scandal. But this bothered me little. My sights were on *Psi*.

A week after Fanny's moving in, I received a letter from Mr. Sackett asking me to come see him at my earliest convenience. I fairly brimmed with anticipation and left immediately for his office. While I was all for freeing myself from the tyranny of publishers, I saw no point in spurning what might be a generous offer.

"I take it you've found a publisher? Is it *The Strand*?"

"I'm afraid that's not the case. Do sit down, Mrs. Reese." I did so and he resumed. "Yesterday I had a very troubling visit. It was the Marchioness of Karpolov. She objected strongly to your depiction of the marquis and has threatened legal action if your story is published."

"But there is no Marchioness of Karpolov," I told him.

"Well, perhaps the marquis has married recently."

"But how could she have learned of my story?"

"I've sent it to several publications. I imagine some editor is an acquaintance."

He was adamant that he could not afford to proceed without a written agreement from the marchioness and her husband. I left, all the more pleased I had begun preparations for resurrecting *Psi*.

Thus began the first mystery. You see, although Madame B_____ did exist, and we were well acquainted, my account of her life was largely fictional. This was at her own request. The Marquis of Karpolov, Europe's greatest lover since Casanova bounced his way from bed to bed across the continent, was nothing more than an invention of my imagination. Quite a good one, to be sure. But purely fictional nonetheless. Or so I thought. Of course, if there were a real Marquis of Karpolov, I could see how the marchioness would object to my depiction of her lord. I suppose all writers encounter this problem sooner or later, but I'd only been writing a year or

two and this was my second time. The first involved a Pinkerton with what I thought was the unlikely name of Leverton. But that's a story that has already been told.

Harry arrived home that evening and it was obvious he wasn't pleased to find we had guests. Then when he learned the parrot had chewed his slippers into a pulp, he almost lost his temper. I pointed out the bird was his gift, and so he merely brooded. Harry had named the parrot Telemachus and told me he'd trained it to repel suitors in his absence. Not that there were any suitors to repel, but I was flattered at the thought.

Harry had to leave town again two days later, which was just as well. A certain friction had developed between him and Michel. This was partly because Harry insisted on calling him Michael. And that, Michel insisted, was an insult to his Parisian heritage. Of course, I knew by his accent he was Quebecois, and had probably never been closer to Paris than Providence, Rhode Island.

For Harry's part, the hostility was due to his newfound jealousy. This was ironic, because Michel seemed to take no interest in me at all. And on the only occasion when a man did show some interest in me, aboard a French steamship the previous summer, Harry had been completely oblivious. When he saw Michel feeding Telemachus, he complained that his flank had been turned, and insisted Fanny and her man be out of the apartment on his return. Then he stormed off to Wilkes-Barre to investigate a fire insurance claim. (Harry's business is insurance fraud.)

I now turned my attention to *Psi*. You are probably wondering why its creators chose such an odd and phonetically imprecise name. As Fanny explained it, this was exactly the reason they had chosen it: No one could read it without wondering if there were some deeper meaning behind it. So, rather than risk exposing their ignorance, they would pretend amusement at the cleverness of it. And no one could utter it without having to explain it. This would always end with a calculated grin, by which the speaker made clear the meaning should be obvious to any save the most obtuse of philistines. It was, in sum, the perfect choice for a literary milieu more noted for its affectation than its talent. To Mary, our maid—an intelligent if uneducated girl—it was always *Sigh*. A beautiful name, she thought.

The next day, Fanny and I visited the warehouse and did an inventory. There was more paper than we could use in a hundred years. And a very nice hand press with many boxes of type. I had these, and a good quantity of paper, delivered to our apartment and placed in the bedroom assigned to—but rarely used by—Michel. Mary had been taken aback when she learned

Psi no more... — Robert Bruce Stewart

what was going on between Fanny and her servant. She feigned pious offense, but again it was simple jealousy. The poor girl somehow imagined she had captured our resident Don Juan's eye. And though he may have made some flirtatious forays in her direction, his main force was laying siege to his mistress's fortune.

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<http://www.harryreesemysteries.com/psi/>