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SCRANTON, PA.

... THE ...
Fraudulent Claim.

By HOWARD FIELDING.

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The exceptional contract between Mr. Horace Preble and the Detective Bureau of the New York police allowed that young man a month in every year when his time was absolutely his own. He was then at liberty to rest from all labor, or to use his talents for his personal advantage. This blessed period had arrived, and Preble had begun to taste anew the joys of idleness, when he received a summons promising so rich a financial reward that he could not afford to disregard it.

Vice President Hersh, of the European and North American Life Assurance society, was the man who desired Preble's services. He did not state the case in his note, but he intimated that the society would not haggle about the question of remuneration.

It will be remembered, perhaps, that Preble was in the detective business for money. He hated it from the bottom of his boots, and, as an abstract proposition, he would have declared death to be preferable. But he had a false pride which would not permit him to be driven to the wall in the battle of life, and the objectionable means of livelihood had come to him when his back was very close to that wall. He had a little appetite for the investigation of an insurance fraud as any man alive, but he could be hired to do it. Men have written immortal verse for the same lofty motive.

Preble called upon Vice President Hersh immediately upon receipt of his note. The official received him cordially, in a cozy office in the society's big building on lower Broadway. There was a cheerful grate fire in the office, and the two men drew their chairs before it, and proceeded to business.

"This is the case of a fraudulent claim," said Mr. Hersh. "Mrs. Albert Monell—she referred to some papers—has given the usual legal notice of her demand for \$25,000, the amount of her husband's policies in this company."

"Oh, yes, he's dead, fast enough?"

"Did the woman murder him?"

"No, indeed."

"Then, what's the matter?"

"Why, the man committed suicide."

"How do you know?"

"Now, that's business," said Preble, rubbing his hands. "That's the question I could have expected from you, Mr. Preble. How do I know? Well, the fact is, I don't know. I only suspect. It is because I want to know, that I call upon you."

"It seems to me that I remember something about the case," said Preble. "Died at his club, didn't he? Doctor said heart disease, I believe?"

"Yes; that was the ostensible cause."

"What did the company's doctor say?"

"He suspected poison, but the record was so infernally clever as to leave no trace of his work. I tell you that a grain of acornia distributed through a man's system is mighty hard to find."

"It you know that he used acornia?"

"We don't; but that poison would have produced the results. We shall allege its use when the case comes to trial."

"But you don't dare to go into court on the medical testimony alone," said Preble. "Is that it?"

"That's it exactly."

"What else have you?"

"We believe that he informed his partner in business that he was going to do this, and that the man can be induced to testify."

"Extraordinary confession to make to a business associate?"

"They had been intimate friends for many years," said Hersh. "That could be presented to the jury."

"The jury," said Preble, "would want something to back it. Even a jurymen would know that a fellow who would



"If that letter could be found—"

"Are you sure he wrote it?"

"We know that he wrote a long letter, and a servant at the house where the Monells lived says that she took it from a boy. But we can't find the boy, and the servant is not positively certain about the night. She is willing to testify, but she's so stupid that she couldn't stand cross-examination, even if she was telling the truth."

"Now, Mr. Preble, you see what I'm driving at. That letter must be found. It's ten to one that he told her all, and it's a hundred to one that she kept the letter. Women always preserve dangerous documents. And in this case it contained her husband's last words to her. It's a thing she'd never part with."

"And you want me to go to her house

and steal it," said Preble, calmly. "Very well. What's it worth?"

"Whatever you think is right, Mr. Preble."

"Go on. What's his name and address?"

"John M. Lawrence. His office is in the Starrow building. They were working two or three patented devices—a railroad signal was one of them, I believe. There was no money in it. They were on the verge of failure."

"So I inferred from Monell's suit-case?"

"That's a point for the jury, certainly."

Preble looked into the fire for a moment. He was wondering what sort of woman Mrs. Monell was, and what chances she would stand in the struggle for existence when so strong a man as himself had so nearly failed.

"How did you find out that Lawrence was willing to make a little bit of money in this way?"

"I don't know that certainly, but it happens that the agent who got Monell into our company was an intimate friend of both of them. He was with them on the evening when, as the agent thinks, Monell told his partner what he was going to do. Of course, our agent did not hear the disclosure, but something was said before he left them which stuck in his mind and excited his suspicion afterward. So he went to Lawrence and tried to get something out of him. Lawrence would only hint at what he knew."

"Why didn't you have him down here?"

"I prefer not to do that. It might be injudicious, as you can readily see. If any bargain is to be made, with him somebody not connected with us directly must do it. You see, I'm trusting you implicitly. They told me at headquarters that I couldn't make any mistake in doing so."

"I'm a thoroughly honest man," said Preble. "That's why I think so well of this particular job."

Hersh eyed him askance, but the expression of the detective's face reassured him.

"It seems to me," Preble said, after a pause, "that your case is weak. Unless you have something better than this you'll lose it."

"There is something better. If we can find it," responded Hersh. "On that night at the club Monell wrote a long letter to his wife."

Preble suddenly sat up straight in his chair.

"Now, that's tangible," he said. "It looks like business. She was in the city at the time? I see. A man, except on special occasions, doesn't write long letters to his wife from the club. He goes there to forget her, as a rule."

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"And you want me to go to her house



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