

It was eight years ago that I first arrived at Penworth Estate. My uncle was well acquainted with the lady of the house, a Mrs. Sibyl Everhart, and had contrived to get me an invitation to stay there for the summer. I was at that time in my early twenties, a green but eager young man with some small skill at numbers and a touch of the pianist's gift. Mr. Everhart ran a shipping company out of his office, and paid me a small sum for keeping his books. In addition to room and board, this made for quite a pleasant summer arrangement. There were a few of the younger set around for me to socialize with. The Everharts had two sons, Harold and Benjamin, and a daughter, Sarah, along with a slew of cousins, neighbors, and friends like myself who filtered in and out. An Everhart cousin a few years my senior became my special companion, an adventurous lad with a crooked nose who went by Spence. He and I filled our leisure hours with all manner of youthful frivolity, playing pranks on our stiff-necked elders and inventing absurd sports and yard games.

Spence had a reputation for laziness that was not altogether undeserved. There was a clever cant to his green eyes that suggested the means of greatness, but no great purpose seemed to bestir him past simple mischief. His parents were forever despairing of his lack of employment, but he was content with his allowance and roguish charms, and paid them little mind. His was a modest stipend that didn't quite seem to match his expenditures, as the accountant in me insisted on pointing out, but I dismissed such nonsense with careless abandon. Spence was an excellent sport and a great friend. What business of mine were his financial habits?

I left Penworth in the fall, Mr. Everhart having chosen to retain my services a bit longer, and plunged into city life with a handful of savings and his good reference. It wasn't too long before I found a decent position as a clerk, working for a fine jewelry shop near the center of

town. I slept above the store for a few months before moving into a place of my own. It was a small, spare flat, but I was mightily proud of it. I had staked out my own little corner of the world.

It was under these circumstances that I was met once more by Spence, my old friend. We had a drink or two, recounting the intervening events of our lives. There was a strange energy in my companion's bearing, more than his usual electric restlessness.

"Aaron," he told me, his fingers drumming on the table. "You should quit your position at once."

I was astonished and somewhat offended, which I intimated in no subtle language. He laughed, his head thrown back in wild amusement.

"Don't mistake my meaning. I want to hire you. I'm to inherit my father's old firm, and I need a good accountant. I'll take right good care of you and all. Do be a good sport and say yes, Aaron?"

I admit I was rather tempted. But I was too excited over my newfound independence to give in right away. Spence was in pretty high temper over it for a bit, but we parted amiably enough. He would visit every now and again in my little flat or invite me to his family manor. Our friendship did not suffer much for our distance, although he finished each visit with a repeat of his offer of employment, which I still would not hear of.

Within a few years I had satisfied my sense of establishment in the world, and Spence took me on with great enthusiasm. He furnished me at once with an office and more than enough supplies of ink and paper, cabinets and filing tabs. I found myself quite comfortable in the new set-up, overall. My room and board was taken care of within Spence's now considerable means, and my salary was more than generous.

I understand that some of these points seem to stray a bit far from my confession, which really only begins about a year ago, but I feel these details are necessary. Spence is an old friend, and a trusty companion if somewhat excitable. His father died of consumption about two years ago and Spence stepped into his shoes with alacrity. I was already in place to take up some of the slack, and the firm ran on admirably. My previous experience with the jeweler proved rather valuable, as it turned out, but it became rather the start of our troubles.

It was my custom to have certain items appraised and brought to my desk before they could be sold. I rather prided myself on my ability to spot a fake. I was incredibly surprised, therefore, when I found before me a rather shoddy replica of one of those intricate clocks out of the far East. It could not be worth more than a few shillings, hardly the sort of thing we dealt in at all. I stared at the thing for a good half an hour, testing its mechanisms, utterly baffled why such a worthless thing had even been brought for my consideration. At last, growing frustrated, I hurled the blasted thing into my wastepaper basket. It cracked wide open.

Furious that I had wasted so much time on it, I sat rather abruptly back in my chair, only to find a most irritating light in my eye. It was coming, I realized, from the clock. The deuced object was not done tormenting me. I stormed over to the wastepaper bin, and my jaw dropped. Inside the cracked frame of the clock was a gemstone the size of my fist. I pulled it out, my eyes fair near popping out of their sockets. A brief examination inclined me to think it genuine.

Spence was in the middle of a meeting when I burst into his office. He was not too upset over it, but his visitor blustered on all the way out the door. I set the gem on his desk.

“God!” he cried in a strained whisper. “It must be worth a fortune!”

I nodded. It was a carbuncle, pure and large as I'd ever seen, easily worth thousands of pounds. Even then I fancied there was something evil in the way it glinted up at us. Spence had that mischievous gleam in his eye that I remembered all too well from youthful escapades.

“Well done indeed, Aaron. This is quite the find.”

“It's almost certainly stolen,” I replied nervously. “It came hidden inside a cheap clock, it's mere chance that I discovered it.”

“Well, we had no hand in stealing it,” Spence rubbed his hands together, peering down at the jewel. “And we've no idea who it properly belongs to...”

I could see by his expression that he was quite set on his current path, try as I might to dissuade him. Our many clients would be quite eager to snatch up such a pretty stone. But if it was stolen, that was another matter. It must be carefully done. No trace could be led back to us.

I kept no records of this particular transaction. We found a rather shady fellow who was quite eager to pay cash for our prize, and for months nothing further was heard of it. I kept my conscience quiet on the matter. It was not I that had stolen it, if indeed it had been stolen. No violent act, no depraved lunacy was committed.

I read the paper each evening as a habit which Spence has been known to tease me for. But he wasn't laughing when he found me with a rather shocking headline. A string of burglaries and murders was sweeping a city not too far from our headquarters: the city where we had sold that accursed gem. At first I could tell myself they were unrelated. But the paper recorded a man screaming about a carbuncle and I knew.

I should have destroyed that gem the instant I saw it. Spence doesn't know I'm here. It would be better if he never does. I'll take whatever charges. But I want to grind that accursed carbuncle to dust. That is my price for my confession.