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THE MAN WHO SHOT AT CATS

By
J. Jefferson Farjeon

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'Well, what have we got on Wilfred Ablett?' asked the superintendent.

The detective looked surprised; almost hurt.

'What have we got on Ablett?' he repeated. 'Pretty well all but the handcuffs.' He added, with a touch of innocent sarcasm, 'Haven't you heard?'

'I've heard a lot, Ellington,' snapped the superintendent, 'but there's one thing we haven't got that I'm still waiting to hear about, and that's *motive*! Our minds may work differently, but I don't care what the evidence is, if I don't see the motive I'm not happy.'

'And I don't care what the motive is,' retorted the detective, 'if I see the evidence, I'm content. This is what we've got on him, and it's enough for me. Now listen, and tell me the flaw.'

He took out his cigarette case, held it out to the superintendent, and they lit up.

'Round about seven o'clock yesterday evening, July 6, Robert Smith is returning home from his office, his home being the top flat of three small flats at Keswick Place, N.W.3. His road passes the back of the flats, and he raises his eyes above the wall of the back garden to see whether his wife is at the window.

'Mrs. Smith didn't happen to be at the window that evening, but Smith saw someone sitting at the open window just below—namely, Wilfred Ablett, the neurotic occupant of the middle flat.

'He saw something else, too, although at the time it did not make much impression on him. Just the momentary gleam of something in Ablett's hand. We know now that it was a revolver.'

'The one he'd brought back from Burma,' nodded the superintendent. 'From where he also brought back his chronic neuroticism.'

'Quite. Well, Smith goes round to the front entrance, and just inside he passes George Baines, the occupant of the bottom flat.

'Baines, as we know, had only taken the flat a week previously, taken it furnished from the usual resident, Henry Hartwell, who had gone off for a month in the Lake District. 'Good evening,' says Smith to Baines, and receives no reply. Baines, apparently, was not a sociable fellow.'

'That's right. Spent most of his time indoors, and Smith had only bumped into him once before. Nobody knew much about Baines, and I wish we knew a bit more. You might talk a bit about him, Ellington.'

'The agent he got the address of the flat from had never seen him before. 'All I can tell you,' the agent said to me, 'is that he had a small bag, a cough, and an American accent, that he gave his name as George Baines, and that he paid a month's rent in advance.'

‘Let’s get back to Smith and follow him up to his flat. He gets there. Has a wash. And he and Mrs. S. are just starting their meal when they are startled by a report. ‘What was that?’ exclaims Mrs. S. ‘Probably a motor-bike back-firing’, says Smith.

‘But then comes another report. They run to the window. See nothing. Then they run to the kitchen window at the back—the window above that at which Ablett had been seen by Smith.

‘And there, in the garden below, lies George Baines. Quoting from the rest of Smith’s statement—’

He took out his note-book. ‘We were aghast. I rushed down to the garden. It was Baines all right, the chap I’d seen alive only half an hour before. He was dead as a doornail. Shot through the heart.’

The detective closed his note-book. ‘And then we came into it. And what did we find?’

‘Not Ablett,’ remarked the superintendent, grimly.

‘No. The bird had flown. And when he came back next morning he said he spent the night at an hotel, which he had, but he had arrived there at eight, not six, as he tried to make out.

‘When asked why he had gone to the hotel, he just stared. In his panic, he hadn’t thought of that.

‘When asked whether a revolver found in an alley a couple of blocks away was his, he denied all knowledge of it. But we found his fingerprints on the weapon.

‘And then, when he had been told this, and that Smith had seen him with the revolver at his window just after 7 p.m., about half an hour before Baines was shot, he broke down, and blubbed that he had aimed at a cat that had started yowling at night and had kept him awake.

‘He’d missed the cat, and when he saw Baines fall he panicked and fled. So there you are! What more do you want?’

‘How many more times am I to tell you?’ demanded the superintendent. ‘If this is going to be a murder charge, I want the motive.’

Ellington laughed. ‘Well, haven’t you got that, too? He aimed at a cat, and killed a man instead. *What a story!*’

The superintendent did not join in the detective’s mirth.

‘You’re ignoring something,’ he rasped. ‘That wasn’t his story. He still denies that he hit the man!’

‘Then why did he run?’

‘Come come! You can answer that one. He ran because he’s a nervous wreck, and because he knew that even detectives sometimes jump to wrong conclusions!’

‘I’m not defending Ablett’s brain, any more than I’m defending his veracity, but before I make up my mind about him and see clearly what the charge should be, I want—yes, sergeant?’

He broke off as a police sergeant entered the room. The newcomer advanced importantly and held out a small book.

‘Wonderful how a search warrant helps, sir,’ he said. ‘We found this, and thought it might interest you. It’s Ablett’s diary. You only want to read from a week back.’

The superintendent took the book.

Then he read out:

‘*June 30.* Now someone has started coughing below me. You lie and wait for the next cough, and it doesn’t come, and you say ‘Good!’ and then it comes. Who is it? It can’t be Hartwell. He went off yesterday to the lakes.

‘*July 1.* This is getting unbearable. Cough, cough, cough. I don’t know if I can stand it.

‘*July 2.* Why doesn’t he go to a doctor? I mean, there’s no let-up! Does he enjoy it? One can’t get any sleep at all.

‘*July 3.* I’ve just banged on the floor. I’m writing this in bed. Has it stopped him? Yes! No! Here it comes! Cough, cough, cough! Thump, thump, thump! Cough, cough, cough! I believe he’s doing it on purpose!

‘*July 4.* To-day I did rather an extraordinary thing. I took a train into the country, and when I got out I walked till I came to some quiet woods, and then I lay down and went to sleep amid the most wonderful silence. I slept for hours. I had one nasty moment when I woke up, because I thought I was back in Burma, but when I’d got over that shock I lay down again for a few minutes, and then came home. Now I needn’t go to bed, need I? He can cough himself to death! Who cares?

‘*July 5.* I can’t stand it, I can’t stand it, I can’t stand it! Now he’s begun to whistle as well as wheeze. Cough, cough, cough—cough, cough, cough—wheeze—whistle. I can’t stand it! I can’t stand it! My God, one day I’ll shoot that chap!’

The inspector closed the book, and then suddenly took out a large pocket-handkerchief.

‘That’s the poor devil’s last entry,’ he growled, mopping his brow, ‘and he won’t be making any more. Next day George Baines was shot bang through the heart. Happy, Ellington? Nice, juicy headlines, eh, and a cinch for the jury. You’ve won.’

He turned rather wearily to the telephone at his elbow as it rang.

‘Don’t worry,’ smiled the detective. ‘I won’t crow.’

The superintendent answered the ’phone call, confining his side of the conversation to monosyllables, then replaced the receiver and got up.

‘You’re not going to have the chance,’ he said. ‘That was a hospital. George Baines is there, dying, and he wants to make a statement.’

‘What!’ shouted the detective, leaping to his feet.

But the superintendent pushed him down into his chair again.

‘You sit tight till I come back,’ he said. ‘The doctor only wants one of us. I’m taking that statement myself.’

An hour later the superintendent returned, and found Ellington seething with indignant impatience. Unconsciously repeating the superintendent’s own earlier inquiry, the detective asked: ‘Well, what have you got?’

‘Not Wilfred Ablett,’ answered the superintendent. ‘Have one of mine this time.’

He held out his case. The detective took a cigarette with a grunt.

‘As a matter of fact, it wasn’t George Baines,’ began the superintendent.

‘Will you repeat that?’ begged Ellington, politely.

‘It wasn’t George Baines,’ repeated the superintendent, ‘but perhaps I’m not quite fair in putting it that way. It was the man we knew as George Baines, but his real name was Konrad Clark, a crook, and when he took the bottom flat at Keswick Place, he was going into hiding after being chased across the Atlantic by somebody who owed him something for double crossing them.

‘He was at the end of his tether, and that cough of his was finishing him.’

‘Who was chasing him?’

‘His twin brother, Alfred. They were as alike as two peas, and owing to a mistake in an identity parade after Konrad had cracked a crib in Canada, Alfred was nabbed and juggled for

it, while Konrad got away. When Alfred got out, he began looking for his brother, and the hunt ended last night.’

Detective Ellington looked up sharply.

‘Then it wasn’t George Baines—or, rather Konrad Clark—Smith said good evening to in the entrance to the flats?’

‘It wasn’t. When we question Smith again we can be sure he never heard that fellow cough, and the reason the man didn’t reply was because the business he was on didn’t put him in a communicative mood.’

‘It was Konrad’s brother, Alfred—trying to get into the flat that had been bolted against him. Failing his efforts at the front, Alfred went round to the garden to try the back. The back windows were open.’

The superintendent paused. ‘And now, Ellington, suppose you finish it for me?’

The detective put himself into the position of the pursued brother, while recalling the full details of Robert Smith’s statement.

‘I think I can do it,’ he said. ‘Smith heard two shots.’

‘Yes, we might have developed that point before,’ remarked the superintendent. ‘That was one of the frills you left out.’

‘Thanks for rubbing it in. The first shot was Ablett’s. The fool really *did* fire at a cat! He wasn’t going to have yowling added to coughing.’

‘The second shot was Konrad Clark’s—alias George Baines. He was at the window, watching for Alfred, and in his panic he thought the first shot came from Alfred—though, of course, nothing actually went his way.’

‘So he shot back. And down went Alfred. And away ran Konrad in a brain storm—’

‘As Ablett did a minute or two later,’ interposed the superintendent. ‘Queer if they’d taken the same direction—two men bunking together from the same corpse! But you’ve still got to tell me how Konrad died?’

‘That’s easy. Didn’t you say he was at the end of his tether—and that his cough was finishing him?’

The superintendent nodded. ‘He didn’t spend his night at an hotel, like Ablett. He was picked up in the early morning outside the hospital to which he’d managed to drag himself, was taken in, and when he came to made his statement. A doctor, two nurses, and myself heard him make his statement, and I took it down.’

‘So now, Ellington, we’ve got our evidence and motive complete and we can both be satisfied.’

‘Sure, sure,’ admitted the detective, with a smile, ‘but since you’re so keen on motives, there’s one that seems to be missing.’

‘Oh, what’s that?’

‘Why did Konrad make his statement?’

The superintendent wagged his head.

‘It’s too late now to ask him,’ he replied, ‘but I’m not worrying about that. Even crooks, you know, sometimes like to die clean. But suppose we leave the dead and get back to the living? Isn’t it time we went to soothe poor old Wilfred Ablett?’