

The Case of the Forged Letter

Harvey J. O'Higgins

Illustrated by

F. R. Gruger

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The Case of the Forged Letter

By HARVEY J. O'HIGGINS

ILLUSTRATED BY F. R. GRUGER

When Harvey O'Higgins was cub reporter on a Toronto newspaper he revelled in the mysteries of the police "beat." He even longed to be a detective. Now he writes detective stories instead, and ranks as one of the greatest novelists Canada has produced.

I never take divorce cases," Duff said. "I'm a detective, not a Peeping Tom. There's nothing interesting in a divorce case for anyone but a smut-hound. Take it to the Society for the Suppression of Vice."

He said it jocularly, with his most engaging smile—the smile of a jovial parish priest on the face of a fat sceptic. There was a genial astuteness about that smile. It forgave cynically all the sins of the flesh. But the man on whom it beamed and twinkled did not yield to it. He continued to regard Duff with a frown wrinkling his high legal forehead and his mouth professionally severe.

"A divorce," he protested, "is just what Dunbar doesn't want. It's to try to avoid a divorce that I've brought him to *you*. He needs help—of a kind that I can't give him."

He was a lean and keen and dark young lawyer, precociously bald and sober for his years. He looked foreign, but his name was Allan—John Glendenning Allan. He had come to Duff before, to ask aid in gathering evidence for a case in court, but Duff had never before seen him look so worried. "This Dunbar's a client of yours, is he?"

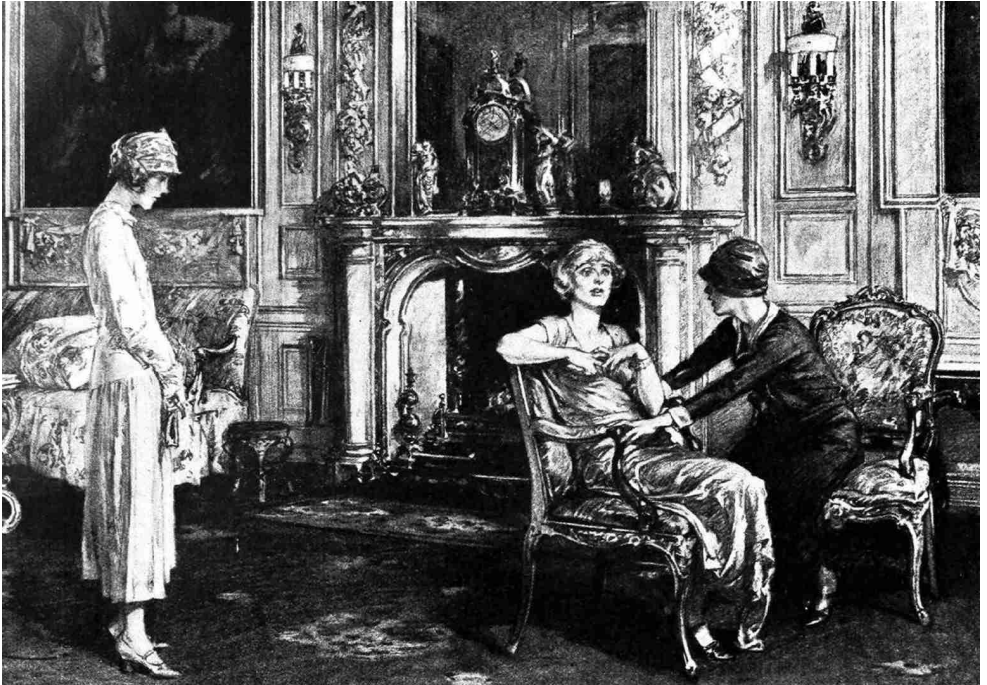
"Yes, and an old friend."

"What's he been doing?"

"Nothing at all," Allan assured him. "That's the mystery."

"Oh, there's a mystery, is there?" Duff settled back in his swivel chair, at his old office desk, in all the majesty of his bulk and muscle. "What's the mystery?"

He was a huge man, a great mastiff of a man in comparison with the slim alertness of Allan's breed; and he watched Allan, and listened ponderously to him, with a deceptive air of slow placidity. He had a feeling that Allan's manner was "off normal," as he would have said—that Alan had some secret concern in Dunbar's troubles which he was concealing. It was for the explanation of this concern that Duff watched, behind his own mask of benign composure.



Mrs. Dunbar had at last been unwillingly convinced of the origin of the forged love letter.

The "mystery," Allan explained, came from a letter. Mrs. Dunbar had found a letter that apparently had been written by her husband to another woman—a love letter so conclusively guilty on its face that she had left him and refused to return. He had not written the letter. No, he had *not* written it. But she would not listen to him. She would not even see him to hear what he had to say. She had gone to live with her sister, and he was afraid that she was going to move for a divorce.

"Where's the letter?" Duff asked.

Ah, that was the difficulty. The letter had been destroyed. "Her sister was visiting her when she found it," Allan explained. "She's very devoted to

Dunbar—the sister is. And as soon as she saw what the letter was, she threw it in the fire, on the impulse, to protect him.”

“I see,” Duff said. “Who is this sister? And who is Dunbar?”

Well, Dunbar was A. Burton Dunbar, the only child of Archibald J. Dunbar who had been a “traction magnate” in the days when electric street railways paid large dividends. The elder Dunbar had been wise enough to foresee what the automobile was likely to do to the trolley car, and he had sold out all his street-railway holdings in the early nineteenth-hundreds and invested his fortune in New York real estate. Burton Dunbar had inherited that fortune. He had also inherited the services of a very loyal and clever secretary, named Beulah Root, in his father’s office; and after his father’s death, he had put Beulah Root in charge of the office and left to her all the business of rents, leases and repairs in connection with his property. She had under her an office force to take care of his correspondence and his book-keeping, as well as a superintendent and a staff of workmen to inspect and repair the houses and buildings that he owned. He appeared at his office, once a week or so, as a matter of form, to approve what had been done and to sign the pay checks. If anything arose that could not wait for his weekly appearance, she brought it to him at Blue Hills, New Jersey, where he lived. She had arrived on some such mission, one Saturday of the previous month, and she had stayed over Sunday, on Mrs. Dunbar’s invitation. The incriminating letter was found on Sunday night, and Mrs. Dunbar—who had been Laura Root before her marriage—left with her sister Beulah on Monday morning.

“Wait a minute,” Duff interrupted. “Dunbar had married his secretary’s sister?”

“Yes.”

“How come?”

“Well,” Allan admitted, “I was a good deal mixed up in that. Dunbar and I were at Columbia together, and he used to take me with him when he went to call on the two Root girls. He’d met Laura through Beulah, I think. I know he was in love with her quite a long time before his father would let them marry. I understand the father consented to it, at last, because Burton as a married man would be exempt from the first draft. They were married in the summer of 1917.”

He had become noticeably more guarded in his manner, but Duff pretended to be unaware of it. He asked only, "How did the sister, Beulah, feel about that?—about the marriage?"

"She stood out against it as long as his father did."

Duff nodded, thoughtfully. "Bring Dunbar in," he said, "and let me have a look at him."

They were in Duff's public office, an office which he had rented as it stood—furniture and all—from a discouraged patent attorney who had retired from practice. It was a sedate and shabby office that looked as little as possible like the consulting room of a private detective, purposely. Behind it, and on the floor above, were the file rooms, the stenographers' rooms, the operatives' rooms and the rest of the office plant of a modern detective agency; but these were all concealed from the public so that Duff might, if he wished, invite "suspects" to his sanctum as a shyster lawyer, or a promoter of doubtful enterprises, or in whatever other character he chose to assume.

Allan went briskly to the door to summon his friend Dunbar from the waiting room. He went with relief and, to Duff, it seemed to be the relief of a man who was getting rid of an unpleasant responsibility. Duff watched him and narrowed his eyes in a puckered speculation.

"Burt," Allan called. "Come in here, will you?" And Dunbar entered with a large, slow diffidence.

He was a full-blown, handsome blond, dressed as if he had come direct from the links in tweeds and golf stockings, thick-soled outing shoes, a soft collar—and an all-over coat of tan that did not whiten under the thin fluff of hair on the top of his head. That hair was a dark dandelion yellow, and even where it was thinnest it had the ripple of fine wool freshly washed and carded. He looked, indeed, as chemically clean and sweet as if he had been sponged in chlorides. He had softly staring, shy blue eyes, of which the whites were a trifle bloodshot, his mouth was a little loose and he was growing somewhat heavy in the waist; but he had not the appearance of dissipation so much as an air of over indulgence—of comfortable over indulgence in too many alcoholic drinks on the verandas of country homes, looking out over flowering shrubs and garden borders to green-upholstered lawns and the shadows of well-trained trees that had spent their lives in the service of the family.

He was not the type of man whom you would expect to find involved in a mystery, for although he was silent with Duff and Allan it was the sad and innocent silence of an injured child among its helpful elders. He let Allan speak for him, trustfully; and when he had to answer a question from Duff, he glanced at Allan first, like a younger brother looking to his natural protector. He was large, helpless, sweet, simple and direct. Obviously, he would appeal to anyone for aid, with no shame in asking for it, and no reticences.

It appeared, from his replies and Allan's, that there was no one whom Dunbar could suspect of having forged the letter; and there was no one whom his wife could definitely suspect of being the woman to whom it had been written. He had no special woman friends. He was evidently of that type of arrested development which is commonly called "a man's man"—shy with women, undoubtedly afraid of them, and consequently uncomfortable with them. He had been a good golfer and a better tennis player until an automobile accident crushed his right wrist and ended his career as an athlete. He was now secretary-treasurer and general head of the Blue Hills Country Club, and his particular hobby was collecting the "three-cent '51'", which is an American postage stamp issued from 1851 to 1856 when the plates were destroyed by a fire.

Duff had never heard of anyone collecting specimens of a single postage stamp. Allan explained how you could distinguish the issues of the various years by slight variations in the color of the stamps; how you identified a stamp as printed from one plate or another by microscopic differences in design or by little threadlike cracks that had developed in the plates; and how, in the end, if you were expert, you could say, for instance, "This stamp was printed in 1853 from plate number one, and it was the third stamp of the fourth row on the plate." Dunbar owned "one of the most complete collections in existence." There was only one larger collection, and that belonged to a man who had devoted his life to a study of the three-cent '51 and written a book about it.

Dunbar listened to his friend's account of his stamps politely, but he did not speak. He listened to Duff's interested questions in the same silence; and if Duff had counted on a collector's enthusiasm to draw him out, Duff failed. Dunbar said nothing.

"Well," Duff said, "it sounds like good training for a detective. If you can tell where a three-cent stamp came from seventy years ago, you ought to be able to trace a letter that arrived last week."

Dunbar tried to smile but he did not quite succeed.

“The trouble is,” Allan explained, “that he has never seen the letter.”

“Are they sure it was in your handwriting?”

Dunbar shook his head. “It was typewritten. I don’t write—not since I broke my wrist. I just sign my name—with my left hand.”

“Typewritten?” Duff sat up. “Now, *that’s* interesting.”

“Why?”

“It makes the forgery so much easier—for the forger. And the temptation so much greater.”

Dunbar nodded sadly. He seemed not so much depressed by the talk about the letter as heavily resentful when he thought of the injustice that had been done him.

“Well,” Duff said, “here we are. Some unknown person, for some unknown reason, has forged a compromising letter in your name, and the letter’s been destroyed. There’s no evidence to prove that you’re innocent. In a case of this sort, all we can do is to induce them to come again.”

“Come again?” Allan asked. “What do you mean?”

“Write another letter.”

“Oh, I see. How will you do that?”

“I don’t know yet. That’s the problem.” He began to shift around the pens, the pencils, the ink and the papers on his desk, as if he were setting the problem in order before him. “We can assume that whoever wrote this letter, they intended to make trouble between you and your wife. It’s our best lay to encourage them to continue. We’ll have to prepare a little plant of some sort.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. And for that purpose,” Duff said, “I’d better be a lawyer—not a detective. You’ve put this difference with your wife in my hands, to arrange a separation or a divorce, or whatever else she wants—”

“Oh no!” Dunbar was horrified. “I don’t—”

“No, of course. We understand that, Burt,” Allan assured him. “This is just Mr. Duff’s method of investigating.”

“And meanwhile,” Duff cut in, “you’ll take Mr. Dunbar and put him on a boat to Europe, without letting him see his secretary or anybody else. He’ll have to promise not to write or answer any letters or any telegrams about this business, and not to discuss it with anyone he meets on his travels. Otherwise, I’ll not take the case.”

“Oh, but I say!” Dunbar protested.

“All right. I’ll attend to that,” Allan promised.

“The important thing,” Duff explained, “is not to let him see or communicate with his secretary, because anything he confides to *her* will reach his wife. You can let him make out a check to cover the office salaries and expenses for a month. After he’s sailed, mail this to Miss Root with a note from him saying that he’s put his affairs in my hands, as his lawyer. I’ll get a housekeeper to take charge of his home during his absence, and he’ll leave a note saying that she can’t be discharged by Mrs. Dunbar if she comes to Blue Hills while he’s away.” He turned to Dunbar. “You may be the victim of a serious conspiracy—a conspiracy in which this compromising letter is only the first step. You’ll have to be very careful and absolutely silent. I’ll have your house watched so that no more letters can be planted on you there. And I’ll find some way, if necessary, to get an operative put in to watch your office.”

Dunbar looked thoroughly alarmed and bewildered.

“Fortunately, you’ve got your lawyer here to rely on.” He referred to Allan. “I’ll report to him regularly, and I’ll do nothing without his advice. Good-bye. I hope you have a pleasant voyage.”

He went back to the papers on his desk. Dunbar turned helplessly to Allan.

“Come along, Burt, and reserve your stateroom,” Allan said. And at Dunbar’s hesitation, he added confidently: “He’ll probably have the whole thing straightened out before you reach the other side.”

Dunbar went. And, in the end, he went to London. But he went with a weakly stubborn reluctance that kept Allan as busy, for several days, as a nurse-maid with a spoiled child; and he kept coming to Duff for advice and assistance as if Duff were the father or the guardian of his charge. Duff used the interviews to put together the story of Beulah and Laura Root in such detail as he could get. And he used the interval also, to establish a woman operative in authority over Dunbar’s house at Blue Hills

and to obtain from her such information as she could glean from the gossip of the servants.

Duff had a peculiar way of working on a “mystery.” He yawned over it. He idled on it. He gathered information about it in the lazy manner of an artist who is waiting for an idea to strike him before he begins work. He did not really think of it at all, nor try to plan out any theory of it. He loafed and waited on it, and busied himself with other routine things.



“There’s no question of a divorce. Nor of a separation.” As Duff pronounced these words Miss Root sat back at ease.

In that way he accumulated details about the Root sisters. And their story seemed simple enough. They were the daughters of a Brooklyn

newspaper man who had been divorced by his wife in 1907, when the girls were still in their teens. In 1908, he disappeared in the West, to avoid paying inconvenient alimony, and Beulah went to work to support her mother and her sister. She found work in Archibald J. Dunbar's office, and she became his confidential secretary. When the mother died, in 1911, Beulah continued to support her sister Laura, six years younger than she, while Laura studied music, took singing lessons, and prepared herself for a career. Then, in 1913, when Burton Dunbar was in his final term at college, he saw a photograph of Laura Root on the desk of his father's secretary. He and Beulah were already quite friendly. He took advantage of that friendship to meet the pretty sister; and before Beulah understood what was going on, he and Laura had arrived at a secret engagement. Beulah promptly told her employer, and for four years she and the elder Dunbar tried to break off the match. In vain. Finally, in 1917, the father developed Bright's disease; Burton threatened to enlist unless he were allowed to marry; and the elder Dunbar, facing his own decay and the probable extinction of his family, withdrew his opposition. Laura Root gave up her musical ambition to marry a fortune; Burton, when his father died, put Beulah in charge of his office at a salary of twelve thousand dollars a year; and everyone seemed settled in happiness forever after.

All their prospects of happiness had now gone glimmering, but it was impossible to find out why. Duff's operative, planted in the house at Blue Hills as a housekeeper, discovered nothing in the gossip of the servants to explain the catastrophe. Mrs. Dunbar had been jealous, yes. She had been jealous to such a degree that Dunbar had always carefully avoided giving her any cause for it. His open indifference to women and his good looks had naturally encouraged them to plague him with mischievous attempts at country-club flirtations, but he had fled from them all. He had devoted himself to the masculine activities of the membership, arranged gymkanas and golf and tennis tournaments, organized a "good roads association" and served on a township committee of local patriots in a league for better government. His life had been apparently as dull as it was innocent. His wife danced and dined and played bridge, remodelled the house, laid out a formal English garden, and competed in the local flower show. She had been busy and popular, with nothing much to do and plenty of time and lots of money with which to do it. She had no children to worry her and no relatives. Her sister Beulah kept to herself, living alone in a Brooklyn apartment and refusing to come to Blue Hills except as a secretary, to see Dunbar. She had done this with no ill-feeling whatever. She had

simply avoided the embarrassments of a complicated social situation. The sisters continued friendly, but Beulah, on her twelve thousand a year, did not propose to figure in Blue Hills as a subsidized poor relation of the Dunbars, and the Dunbars respected her independence.

The only detail of any possible significance which the housekeeper supplied to Duff was this: Allan, Dunbar's friend and lawyer, had been a frequent visitor at Blue Hills for two years after their marriage, and he had then abruptly ceased to come there. Duff put this piece of information away in the back of his mind to let it hatch if it had any life in it. And he was conscious of it hidden there when Allan came to report that he had seen Dunbar off on his Atlantic liner.

"Well," Duff said, with a yawn, "I haven't even discovered, yet, why his wife seized on this fool letter so eagerly. It may be, of course, that she found her life too placid. She may have just fastened on the letter to give herself a little emotional excitement. In that case, we'll see if we can't provide her with enough to last her for the rest of her life."

Allan made no comment.

Duff asked: "Did you post Dunbar's letter to his secretary?"

"Yes," he said, "I posted it on my way back from the boat."

"And I don't discover the origin of Mrs. Dunbar's continual jealousy," Duff reflected. "That sort of thing's usually due to the fact that a woman's giving her husband cause for jealousy herself and naturally suspects him of doing the same."

Allan continued mutely attentive.

"Or," Duff said, "it may come from her childhood. It may be an unconscious imitation of her mother's experience with her father. In either case, a good jolt may do her good. I'll have to see her, and I don't see how I can reach her except through her sister. Tell me: why hasn't Mrs. Dunbar consulted *you*?"

This was all given in the one tone of gossipy frankness, and Allan replied—in a good imitation of the same tone—"She did come to consult me. And I told her I couldn't advise her."

"Why not?"

"Because Dunbar had already appealed to me, and I couldn't act for both parties."

Duff yawned. He asked, indifferently: "Was that your only reason?" And he rose, fatigued and bored and heavy, from his desk, to stretch himself and walk up and down the room.

"It was the only reason I cared to give her," Allan said.

Duff asked: "And me?"

Allan glanced at him suspiciously. "I beg your pardon?"

Duff was looking out the window, his hands in his pockets. "Is that the only reason you care to give me?"

And Allan answered, cold and defensive: "Yes."

Duff nodded and walked away with his thoughts, and sat down at his desk moodily, and strummed on his blotter. "Can you tell me this: When you and Dunbar used to call on the two Root girls, which one were *you* interested in?"

"Now, look here," Allan said hotly. "There's nothing going on between me and Mrs. Dunbar and there never has been! And if you think I know anything about who forged that letter, or why, you might as well come out of it!"

He was red with anger and mortification and resentment against Duff's stupidity. Duff continued to regard him as abstractedly, for all his rage, as if he were a patient who had lost his temper when the doctor asked him about his symptoms. "I see," he said. "You were more interested in Beulah Root, were you?"

Allan swallowed his wrath, but it stuck in his throat. He said through it, thickly: "Yes."

"Did you ask her to marry you?"

"Yes."

"Did she say why she wouldn't?"

"No."

"Was that before Dunbar was engaged to the sister?"

"Yes. What the devil—?"

"All right," Duff cut in. "I'll wait." He began to clear up the disorder of his desk, at the end of his day's work. "If either Mrs. Dunbar or her sister

comes to you, refer her to me. All you know is that Dunbar's tired of the way his wife's been behaving, and he's gone abroad and left it to me, as his lawyer, to arrange a divorce or a separation or whatever else she wants."

"Who do you suppose wrote that letter?" Allan asked impatiently.

"I haven't any idea," Duff assured him. "I'll have to wait till I see his secretary."

And he had not long to wait. The letter from Dunbar, which Allan had posted, must have reached her on the following morning, and at midday she telephoned to Duff's office to ask for an appointment to see him. He gave her three o'clock that afternoon. "And keep everyone away from me," he ordered his office manager, "phone calls and everything else, as long as she's here. I'm a divorce lawyer, on the shady side of the practice, and I don't have clients consulting me by phone or crowding in to see me at three o'clock in the afternoon. And tell the girl, out there, not to announce Miss Root. When she comes, let her walk right in."

He cleared all the correspondence off his desk, and when, after having disregarded a knock on his door, he saw a woman in brown enter slowly, he looked over his glasses at her, without raising himself from his elbows, bending his broad back above his work in a sinister sort of crouch.

"Miss Root?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes."

"Sit down." He pretended to finish scrawling out the sentences which she had interrupted.

She sat down composedly in a chair near his desk and looked around her while he wrote: "Beulah Root, age about 35, height 5 ft. 8 in., weight 145 to 150, eyes greenish grey, no glasses, hair brown turning grey, schoolteacher type, high-shouldered, long-waisted, mouth large, small wart on cheek beside left nostril." He wrote this chiefly to appear busy while he kept her waiting. "Takes pride in hands and feet. Brown tailor-made business suit, silk stockings, patent leather pumps with sensible heels, probably pretty and expensive underclothes. Good legs. Keeps herself fit probably by long walks."

He said, occupied: "I suppose you came to see me about this Dunbar divorce?"

"Divorce?"

“Well, divorce or separation or whatever it is she wants.”

“There’s no question of a divorce. Nor of a separation.” She sat at her ease, her knees crossed, swinging one foot, an arm outstretched to rest a hand on the old-fashioned ivory handle of a brown silk parasol. The only sign she gave of nervousness was in the swinging of the foot.

“There seems to be plenty of question of it in my client’s mind,” Duff said sharply, and put down his pen. “She walked out and left him—didn’t she?—because of a letter that he wrote to another woman.”

“Does he admit that he wrote it?”

“Naturally not. And the letter needn’t enter into the case at all, for that matter. We needn’t discuss it. We can arrange a divorce without going into that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s a county judge up state who handles cases like this when we make it worth his while. The papers are sealed so’s the evidence doesn’t get into print. We provide the usual statutory grounds. There’s a detective agency here that attends to *that*. It’s costly, but it’s cheaper than going to Reno.”

“Mrs. Dunbar would never consent to it.”

“What does she want then?”

“She wants him to prove that he never wrote the letter.”

“I see.”

When Duff had first heard from Allan, how the letter had been found by Dunbar’s wife and destroyed by his secretary, the detective naturally supposed that Dunbar had written it to the secretary and that she had destroyed it to protect herself as much as to shield him. But, after seeing Dunbar, it was impossible to believe him guilty of having written the letter at all; and Duff concluded that Beulah Root, out of jealousy, had probably forged the letter, placed it where Mrs. Dunbar would find it, and then destroyed it in order to get rid of any evidence of her plot. If she *had* done this, it must have been with the intention of breaking up Dunbar’s marriage; and Duff had intended to lead her into a little trap by first pretending that Dunbar was willing to proceed to a divorce and by then proposing that she should assist in manufacturing the evidence for the case.

She refused to be led.

“Why did Mr. Dunbar come to you?” she demanded. “Why didn’t he go to his friend, Mr. Allan?”

“He did,” Duff said suavely, “and Allan refused to handle it.”

“Why?”

“Probably for the same reason that a doctor doesn’t like to treat members of his own family. He knows you all, too well. Do *you* think Dunbar wrote this letter?”

“Certainly not,” she said.

“Have you any idea who did write it?”

“None whatever.”

“But you think it was a forgery?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“And you can’t convince Mrs. Dunbar?”

“No. The more I try to convince her, the more she seems to think that I’m merely trying to shield him.”

“I see.” Duff took off his glasses and polished them thoughtfully. “My orders were to give Mrs. Dunbar whatever she wants, a divorce, a separation, or anything else. If she wants to become convinced of Dunbar’s innocence, perhaps I can arrange *that*.”

“How?”

“In the same way that we’d have convinced our friend, the judge, of his guilt—by producing the necessary evidence.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No? Well, someone has written a compromising letter and forged Dunbar’s name to it. We’ll have a woman write some more letters and forge his name to *them*, and then make her confess that she wrote the first one, too. The detective agency would have given us a woman to act as confidential co-respondent in the divorce suit. They’ll give us someone to take the blame for the letters. That’ll be easy enough.”

“And do you think,” she began scornfully, “that Burton Dunbar—”

“Fortunately,” Duff interrupted, “Dunbar needn’t know anything whatever about it. He doesn’t know *now* who wrote this one letter to him.

I'll never tell him who wrote the others."

"Are you joking?"

"Certainly not. Does Mrs. Dunbar know all the girls who work in her husband's office?"

"No."

"Does Dunbar?—even by sight?"

"I don't believe he does."

"Suppose, then, I tell Mrs. Dunbar that one of these girls is secretly in love with Dunbar and that she's been writing herself imaginary letters from him and signing his name to them. Suppose I tell Mrs. Dunbar that detectives have searched the girl's rooms and found a number of these letters. I produce them. I produce, also, a girl who I tell Mrs. Dunbar, is from your office, and this girl confesses that she wrote the letters—all the letters, including the one that Mrs. Dunbar found. The girl explains that this one letter, by some accident, got among the mail she gave you to take to Dunbar, and Mrs. Dunbar discovered it. You confirm the story. I confirm it. The girl begs for mercy. She begs Mrs. Dunbar not to tell her husband. The whole thing is a silly sentimental bit of girlish nonsense, for which Dunbar is in no way responsible. You insist that the girl must be discharged but you undertake to get her another position. Mrs. Dunbar, if she ever tells her husband, will never tell him who the girl was, for fear he might be tempted to hunt her up. I'll merely cable Dunbar that we've found out who forged the letter and convinced his wife of his innocence. And the whole thing will be settled."

Miss Root took this strange proposal in a strange way. Her foot ceased swinging. She kept her gaze fixed on Duff in a pale, defensive stare.

She sat stiffly motionless. She did not betray herself by so much as the blinking of an eyelash. But, before he had finished, her forehead was moist with perspiration. She made as if to find a handkerchief in her bag, and she stopped herself guiltily.

"Don't you think we could work a scheme like that?" Duff asked.

And she answered, in a strained voice, "Yes."

"Good," he said. "Then I'll provide the girl, if you'll furnish the letters."

"Me?" The word almost died on her lips.

“Yes. Of course.” He was heavily blind and unsuspecting. “You’ve often signed his name to business letters, haven’t you? And the body of the letter, fortunately, can be typed. You can easily imagine the sort of letter a girl like that would write to herself. It needn’t be very convincing—just the day-dream of a starved girl, who’s never had a real love-affair in her life. It’s perfectly natural that a working girl would cheat herself with dreams of the sort about a rich and handsome fellow like Dunbar. I’ll bet, if we could see inside the heads of all the girls in your office, we’d find more than one who might have written herself imaginary love letters from him. The world’s full of that sort of thing. A woman—a business woman’s a human being. She has to have some sort of love in her life—even if it’s only imaginary. I ran across a case, the other day—”

He rose and went to his book shelves of law reports as if to find a record of the case. His back was turned to her, but he could see her reflected in the glass of an engraving that hung above the books. He watched her secretly while he took down a volume and rustled the pages. She found her handkerchief, and dabbled at her forehead with it, and pressed it against her lips, breathing as laboredly as if she had been holding her breath in the effort to conceal her agitation, and had now come to the surface, to gasp her lungs full.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” Duff said, putting the book back on its shelf as if he had failed to find what he was looking for. “We don’t have to have any precedent. We’re going to settle this out of court.” He smiled at her, conspiringly, as he sat down again.

“I don’t think,” she said, “that I would care to—to join in a—a forgery. I don’t think it’s honest.”

Duff laughed, settling back comfortably in his chair. “Maybe not,” he said, “but, you see, there’s *this* difficulty. I’m not a lawyer. I’m a detective. And a detective’s allowed to do lots of things a lawyer couldn’t do.”

“A detective?” Her voice cracked on it. She began to tremble again in spite of herself, watching him in an agony of apprehension that made it impossible to move or to speak.

“Yes,” he said lazily. “A detective. And if I can’t get the case settled for Mr. Dunbar in *this* way, I’m afraid I’ll have to go to what you might call the *Root* of the matter. That might be more inconvenient for all concerned.” He reached out to his office phone. “I think we’d better arrange it between

ourselves as quietly as we can and say no more about it. Hello? Is Miss Kennedy there? Ask her to come here a minute.”

He got up and walked to his window, to look out of it, in silence. She sat with her eyes closed, as white as despair, completely helpless. He glanced at her once and then turned away again, mercifully.

Miss Kennedy entered, behind her, from an inner door—a small dark woman with a tragic face. She worked usually in the file room, and she was dressed for the office. She closed the door behind her and stood waiting with her hand on the door knob.

“Miss Kennedy,” he said, “we have a case here in which we have to work a little plant. A young woman in a downtown office under Miss Root—” He indicated Miss Root with a warning movement of the eyes—“has been forging a number of compromising letters in the name of a client of ours. We’ve got a confession on the promise that we’ll not betray her, and we have to find a substitute for her, to take the blame of the letters. It’ll be all quite private. The only person to whom you’ll have to admit having written the letters is our client’s wife, Mrs. Burton Dunbar. The girl’s in love with the husband. She’s been writing imaginary love letters to herself from Dunbar—quite innocently, you understand—but unfortunately she lost one of them, and it came into Mrs. Dunbar’s hands. Dunbar doesn’t know who the girl is. You’ll not be required to see him—we’ve sent him abroad while we fix the thing up. If you’ll go with Miss Root, she’ll give you the letters, and explain what you have to do, and take you to Mrs. Dunbar.”

Miss Kennedy asked, in a deep and hollow voice, “What was I—a stenographer?”

“Yes, a stenographer in Dunbar’s office.”

They turned to the silent woman in the chair beside his desk. At the sound of Miss Kennedy’s voice, she had made an effort to rise, but sank back again unable to get to her feet.

“The whole case,” Duff explained, “has been very trying for Miss Root. I’m afraid it’s been too much for her. You might just take her inside and let her rest while you’re getting ready. Want to run out a minute and find a bite to eat. I’ve not had time to get my lunch.”

He had the manner of a doctor who has finished a physical examination and leaves his exhausted patient to his office nurse. And Miss Kennedy, as if she were such a nurse, bent down to put an arm around Miss Root and murmured compassionately to her: “Will you come with me?”

And like the doctor who becomes insulated against his patient's pain, Duff was almost indifferent to Beulah Root's emotion. He saw what her story had probably been; and it was a terrible story; but he saw it coldly, as a case, on which he had been called in. She had undoubtedly been in love with Dunbar from her earliest days in his father's office. When the two college boys came calling on her and her sister, she must have flattered herself that the handsome young heir to the Dunbar millions was interested in *her*. She was as scornful of Allan, the clever but penniless law student from the East Side, as her sister was indifferent to the stupid son of wealth: but by a perversity of fate, it was Allan who fell in love with Beulah and Dunbar who fell in love with the sister. Allan was promptly rejected when he proposed, but a marriage with the Dunbar fortune was not to be so lightly refused by the beautiful Laura. What years of anguish must have followed for the loyal and subservient and self-sacrificing sister—those years in which Laura accepted Dunbar, though she had no illusions about him, and Beulah joined with the father to prevent the marriage, and yet tried to act unselfishly and not treacherously towards the younger girl. And after Dunbar's marriage, what miseries of loneliness she must have suffered before she yielded to the mirage of her own imagining and wrote crazy letters to herself as if they had come from him!

Duff could see all that, even if he did not attempt to appreciate it. And he could see that Mrs. Dunbar still preferred Allan to the handsome bore who was her husband. That would account for her jealousy. It also accounted for the sudden cessation of Allan's visits to Blue Hills. And it most certainly accounted for the eagerness with which she had seized the letter, as a proof of her husband's infidelity—and for Allan's embarrassment when she, and then Dunbar, appealed to him for aid. Duff grinned to himself. Well, he was returning Laura to her husband, and Beulah to her desert, and Allan to his law without a scandal and that was all that could be expected of him.

He had no doubt that Beulah Root would provide the necessary letters. It was her only way to avoid a shameful disgrace. And he knew that his "Miss Kennedy" would play her part convincingly as the heart-broken girl who had been living a fairy-tale of love with Dunbar, in her imagination. She had been an amateur actress in her school-days; she had married a tubercular poet and tried to write, unsuccessfully; when he died, and left her with a baby boy, she was willing to do anything to keep her child from starving. She had answered an advertisement of Duff's in which he pretended to need a lady's maid—a lady's maid, however, who was to report to him the private affairs of her mistress—and she had taken the work because it was all that

she could find to do. She had been with him ever since, regularly in the filing room but going out on cases whenever he needed her. He knew her ability. She would deceive Mrs. Dunbar easily.

And yet Duff was enough of an artist to feel dissatisfied with this conclusion of his case. It was too inconclusive. It settled nothing. Mrs. Dunbar would still be dissatisfied with her husband and sentimentally inclined toward an affair with Allan. Her miserable sister would be only more miserable than before—miserable to the point of carrying her dreams of Dunbar into the borderland of insane delusions. And Allan would still be the victim of that fate which had frustrated his affection for Beulah Root. In these circumstances would the case remain closed? Or would something more serious than a forged letter come out of it?

“Well,” Duff assured himself, “I’m only a detective, not a little tin god. I can’t get a new deal for these people. I’m only paid to see that they play their cards without cheating.”

When his Miss Kennedy reported by telephone that Beulah Root had furnished the needed letters, he said: “Good. Go to it. Let me know how you get along with Mrs. Dunbar. Good luck.” And when she came to tell him of her scene with Mrs. Dunbar—who had been at last unwillingly convinced of the origin of the forged love-letter—he congratulated her heartily. “Cheer up,” he said. “You look as if you were all in. Take a week’s holiday and I’ll charge it on Dunbar’s bill. He can afford it.”

She smiled with a painful weariness. “You ought to do something for that poor woman—that Miss Root,” she replied. “It’s a terrible thing for her. I’m afraid it will break her down.”

“I’m afraid so, too,” he agreed. “We ought to get her out of that office, eh?”

“Oh, if you only could!”

“Perhaps I can,” he said. “You run along. Take your boy and beat it to the seaside for a week. Put it on your expense account and I’ll pay it if Dunbar doesn’t.” He had reached out to his office phone. “Call in Mrs. Davenport from Blue Hills,” he ordered his office manager on the wire. “The Dunbar case is closed.” He nodded to Miss Kennedy. “That’s all right,” he replied to her grateful murmur of thanks. “And call up their lawyer, Allan,” he continued into the phone, “and ask him if he can get in to see me right away.”

“Good-bye, girl,” he said, to Miss Kennedy. “Run along now. And tell them to send in those people out there.”

He had clients to receive, letters to answer, operatives to listen to, reports to dictate; and he was busy with cases, detectives and stenographers until word was brought to him that Allan was in the waiting room. “Just a minute,” he said. He took a few brisk turns up and down his room with the tread of a cheerfully preoccupied elephant. “All right,” he told the girl from the outer office. “Send him in.”

He was seated at his desk reading letters when Allan entered—his worries still heavy on his brow—and closed the door behind him to shut in his secret concern, and turned slowly to cross the room to Duff.

“Well!” Duff tossed aside the letter with a gesture that was a welcoming wave of the hand. “We’ve solved your Dunbar mystery.”

“No!”

“Sure as you live! Sit down here. The letter was written by a girl in his office. She’s confessed. We’ve had her repeat her confession to Mrs. Dunbar and *she’s* now convinced of Dunbar’s innocence.”

“No!” His first “No!” had been half incredulous. His second was wholly relieved. “I’ll send a wireless to Dunbar right away.” He made as if to start for the door.

“No. Wait a minute,” Duff laughed. “Not so fast. This has to be handled. Sit down.”

He sat down on the edge of his chair, smiling in a way that made him look suddenly boyish and unsuspecting. And Duff proceeded to take advantage of that trusting mood in him.

“In the first place,” he said, “Dunbar’s not to be told who the girl was. We got her to confess on the promise that no one was to know about it except Miss Root and her sister. In the second place Miss Root doesn’t know the whole truth, and I don’t want her to know it. I don’t even know how much I can tell *you*. Wait a minute. This is rather complicated.”

He passed his hand over his forehead and rubbed the back of his head, perplexed, as if he were trying to decide how much of the story he might honorably tell the lawyer. As a matter of fact he was improvising what he would have called “a little plant.”

“Anything you tell me,” Allan volunteered, “can be as confidential as you please.”

“Well, you see,” Duff explained, frowning, “we’ve led Mrs. Dunbar to believe—and her sister, too—that a love-sick girl in the office was writing imaginary letters to herself as if they came from Dunbar. We’ve made out that one of these letters accidentally got itself into the mail that Miss Root took to Blue Hills and that this was the letter Mrs. Dunbar found.”

“Yes?”

Yes. Well, the truth is that the girl was sore at Miss Root. She’s been accusing Miss Root—to the others in the office—of having an affair with Dunbar. And she forged two of the letters, and showed them to one of the other girls, as letters that she’d found in Miss Root’s desk.”

“The devil you say!”

“Yes.” He studied Allan’s sympathetic expression of distress, calculatingly. “We’ve kept this from Miss Root and we’ve kept it from Mrs. Dunbar. The situation’s kind of complicated. Something else has happened that’s given Miss Root a jar about Dunbar. Her position in the office is going to be impossible.”

“Can’t we get her out of there?”

“I wish we could. You seem to be the only friend she has in the world. Naturally, she doesn’t trust me. I had to tell her I was a detective—when I found out who the girl was that wrote the letters.”

“I think I’d better see her.” He stood up, hesitating.

“Well, be careful what you say to her,” Duff warned him. “You can say I told you that a love-sick girl wrote herself imaginary letters from Dunbar, but don’t let her guess that you’ve heard *she* was suspected of being mixed up in them.”

“No, no. Certainly not.” He put that aside impatiently. “I believe I could get our firm to put her in charge of a department of the office, if she’d take it.”

“Go to it,” Duff rose to pat him on the shoulder. “She’ll be glad, anyway, to have somebody show a little friendly interest in her, if I know her state of mind.”

Allan did not seem to hear. He stood gazing into his hat as if he saw in it some sentimental secret that made him flush a little, tenderly, and slowly smile. When he looked up and caught Duff's eye, he was embarrassed. "All right. Thanks," he said. And he hurried out.

Duff thought to himself: "If she doesn't take him now, she doesn't need to go crazy—she's crazy already."

She took him. Before Dunbar could get back from Liverpool, Allan had married her. Duff read it in the newspapers, but that was the only word of it that he received. "We ought to put it on our bill," he told Miss Kennedy, "but I suppose we can't. It's one of the by-products of the case that has no market value. What's more, we'll lose a client by it. She'll never let Allan come near me again—not if she can prevent it. And she'll never let Dunbar. I wonder what she'll tell them."

Whatever it was, it had its effect. Dunbar paid his bill, but Duff never saw any of them again.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Case of the Forged Letter* by Harvey J. O'Higgins]