

# *Stop Thief*

**Harvey J. O'Higgins**

Illustrated by

**Roy Fisher**

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*Title:* Stop Thief

*Date of first publication:* 1925

*Author:* Harvey J. O'Higgins (1876-1929)

*Illustrator:* Roy Fisher (1890-1953)

*Date first posted:* May 3, 2023

*Date last updated:* May 3, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230504

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

# STOP THIEF

By HARVEY J. O'HIGGINS

ILLUSTRATED BY ROY FISHER

*An academy degree—or handcuffs?  
This was the extraordinary alternative facing a client of Duff's, the psychological detective.*

## I

Duff did not take the case seriously, at first. It did not come to him through the proper door. One of his office staff, a Mrs. Cooley, brought it to him, on behalf of a friend of hers: and he listened to her as a doctor might listen to one of his nurses reporting a friend's symptoms. "Bring her in," he said cheerfully, "and let's look her over. She may be dreaming." But when Mrs. Cooley went back to the filing room and produced not only her friend Mollie Simpson—who was a stenographer—but Mollie Simpson's employer, who was Mary Bryant, Duff took a look at Mary Bryant and stood up at his desk to meet her, interested.

She was obviously no dreamer. She was a large and matronly young woman, quietly dressed in a mode of expensive simplicity; she entered Duff's office with an air of being the placid centre of her surroundings; and she regarded Duff as if he were the most interesting object in those surroundings, but not permanently important to her way of thinking. Her gaze was direct but unconcerned. She greeted him in a polite murmur and gave him a firm hand. When she sat down, at his invitation, it was with a sort of old-fashioned dignity, completely self-possessed.

He expected Mollie Simpson to supply the voice in their consultation—for Miss Simpson was an alert and nervous young thing in bright colors and

a figured French cloche, and she sat on the edge of her chair as if she were about to spring forward into the conversation at the first word. But when he said, on the rising inflection of a query. "I understand that you're worried about your aunt?" Miss Bryant answered quietly: "She's my great aunt—my father's aunt. She's seventy-six years old." And, from that beginning, throughout the whole interview, it was she who answered Duff and explained the case to him, in an even flow of narrative, with scarcely a word from her eager secretary, who listened like an admiring younger sister.

**T**he great aunt, a Mrs. Newton P. Hefflin, was a wealthy and eccentric widow who had lived alone for many years in a Victorian brownstone "mansion" on Madison Avenue near Forty-second Street. "About five years ago," Mary Bryant said, "she sent for me, because she saw my picture in a newspaper—it was printed in connection with the campaign for woman suffrage—and she asked me if I'd live with her as a sort of paid companion. My home is in Weehawken. I had already planned to come to New York on work of my own, and we agreed that I should live with her and be free to attend to my private affairs."

Mrs. Hefflin had quarrelled with all her relatives. She had no friends. She was impatient and domineering and bad-tempered, even with her old servants. "I know that this is quite incredible," Mary Bryant said, "but she was so lonely in her home, before she sent for me, that she used to walk to the Grand Central station, every morning after breakfast, and read her paper in the waiting room, so as to have people around her."

It was there, in the Grand Central Station, that she first encountered a starving musician named Michael Raffaelli Coombs, who came into the waiting room, one December morning, to warm himself. "I don't know how they met," Mary Bryant said. "She never speaks to strangers. She's always very suspicious of people. And she never gives money to street beggars. She believes they're all imposters."

Soon after Mary Bryant came to live with Mrs. Hefflin, Michael Raffaelli Coombs was added to the establishment as a sort of secretary and court musician. He persuaded Mrs. Hefflin to found a "Hefflin Fund" for American music, under his management, and he had her employ Mollie Simpson as a stenographer on correspondence connected with the affairs of this Fund. Mollie Simpson and Mary Bryant at once became friends and confidantes, and among their confidences they shared a common suspicion of Michael Raffaelli Coombs. "The other day," Mary Bryant said guardedly,

“Miss Simpson found in his desk a book called ‘Questioned Documents’ by a man named Osborne. It’s a book about forgeries and fraudulent wills—”

“Yes. I know it,” Duff cut in, as if he were unaware of her implication that Coombs was perhaps preparing to forge a will for Mrs. Hefflin. “Tell me: does Mrs. Hefflin go to church?”

“No,” Mary Bryant said. “She’s not orthodox.”

“And she’s very close in money matters?”

She replied, after a moment, reluctantly, “Yes.”

“And conservative?”

“Conservative?”

“Yes. Does she use a motor car, for instance?”

“No. She still has horses and a coupe.”

“Exactly. Then what is this man Coombs?—a spiritualist?”

Mary Bryant frowned, puzzled. Evidently, she did not see any connecting thread in the sequence of Duff’s questions. Evidently, too, she did not wish to gossip with Duff about those personal peculiarities of her great aunt which she considered outside the case. “When I heard about the book on wills and forgeries,” she explained, “I was afraid that Mr. Coombs was either trying to persuade her to leave money for the Hefflin Fund in his hands, or that he was even thinking of forging a will—”

“Quite so,” Duff interrupted again, “but which? Which is he trying to do? That’s why I ask you these questions. If she’s not sustained by some religious conviction, she’ll probably have a serious fear of death.” He was using his most florid professional manner, rather pompous. “Of course, you know, the fear of death generally shows, at her age, as miserliness and conservatism; and I judge, from your description of her, that she has a fear of death and no religious faith to help her. The next question is this:—Has Coombs any faith, such as spiritualism, to offer her? If he hasn’t, he’ll find it impossible, I should say, to talk to her about her will. Her fear of death will make the whole subject abhorrent to her. She’ll fly into a rage at him for mentioning it. And if he’s determined to have the Hefflin Fund continued after her death, he’ll have to forge the provision himself. Do you follow me?”

“Yes.” She nodded, thoughtfully. “He’s not a spiritualist. He has no religion, so far as I know.” She hesitated. “Mrs. Hefflin will not live with anyone who expects to gain anything by her death. That is why she refuses to see her relatives. She warned me, when I agreed to come to her, that she would leave me nothing in her will.”

“She probably warned Coombs in the same way.”

“I imagine so.” She glanced at her secretary. “Miss Simpson believes that he’s been falsifying his accounts—his expenditures from the Hefflin Fund—so as to put by something for himself.”

“Naturally. Who is he? Do you know?”

She knew nothing about him except what he had volunteered. He said that he came originally from St. Louis, where his father had made a fortune as a railroad contractor. He did not remember his father. His parents had been divorced in his infancy, and his mother, who was artistic, had taken him abroad at an early age to study music. He was to have been a composer; and, when he returned to America, it was as a prospective young Chopin playing his own compositions on the piano, at public recitals. He had some success, particularly in Chicago, where he was taken up socially and applauded in the drawing rooms. He did not suppose, then, that he would ever have to make his daily bread and butter out of music, because his mother apparently had a large income and they lived expensively; but when she died suddenly of an overdose of morphine—which she was using as a sleeping draught—he found himself penniless. She had been living on her capital, and she left him nothing but debts. He borrowed enough money to escape from Chicago. He came to New York to teach music. He had no standing in New York. He was too poor to rent a proper studio and make an impressive appearance. He failed to obtain any pupils; and he might have starved on the streets if Mrs. Hefflin had not rescued him.

“His influence over her seems rather sinister, does it?” Duff asked.

No. She could hardly say that it seemed wholly sinister. By interesting Mrs. Hefflin in music and musicians, he had supplied her with an unselfish fad that filled her day and occupied her mind. She had become the flattered patron of a number of young singers and pianists and violinists who gave recitals in her home, and paid in gratitude for the assistance they obtained from the Hefflin Fund, and sang or played to her, over the heads in Carnegie Hall, when she sat in her box at the public concerts which she financed. “He’s very clever,” Mary Bryant said. “He never allows them to come to her

with any of their little professional jealousies. He keeps all their quarrels and their back-bittings from her. He's quite ruthless in the way he manages them. I should never suspect the trouble he has with them if it weren't for what Miss Simpson tells me."

She turned to Mollie Simpson, as she spoke, and that tense young woman said breathlessly: "He makes fun of Mrs. Hefflin behind her back!"

Duff ignored her. He had a purpose in ignoring her. "Her heirs are alarmed, of course?" he asked Miss Bryant. "And they've come to you?"

"Yes. They seem inclined to hold me responsible. I advised them to consult their lawyer, and the lawyer replied that it was a case for a detective."

"Do they know that you've come to me?"

"No. No one knows *that*."

"Well." Duff had picked up a lead pencil from his desk. He began, absent-mindedly, to draw a design of squares and circles, on a scratch pad. "I could have one of my operatives rope Coombs," he said, as he drew the first circle, "and make friends with him, and find out if he's planning anything crooked; but it'd take a long time, and I'd have to use the cleverest detective I've got, and that'd cost you a lot of money." He put a square around the circle. "Or I could wire to Chicago and St. Louis, and have some of my people there pick up his trail and get his record. We might be able to judge from *that* whether he was on the level with you all; and, if he wasn't, we could blow him up with the information we got. But that would cost a lot of money, too, and it might be money thrown away. We might not find anything against him." He joined the corners of the square with diagonals that crossed each in the centre of the circle. "It would be better if we could make a little plant for him and try him out—a plant that wouldn't work if he was innocent and *would* work if he was planning anything crooked." He was drawing radial lines from the centre of the circle to meet the circumference where it touched the sides of the squares. "That wouldn't take so much time or cost so much money. It'd have to be arranged so as to clear him of any of your suspicions if he was innocent, and scare him into running away if he was guilty." He was shading alternate segments of the circle in a pattern of black and white. "It ought to turn on the question of whether or not he was thinking of Mrs. Hefflin's will—either trying to get her to make a provision for him under the Hefflin Fund or flirting with the idea of forging a codicil, or something of the sort." He turned abruptly to Mollie Simpson. "Could you be called out of town for a day or two?"

“Out of town?”

“Yes. Have you any out-of-town friends or relatives who might send you a wire?”

She all but whispered her reply, in the gasping tenseness of excited conspiracy: “I have a married sister in Schenectady.”

“That will do.” He dropped his pencil. “I’ll telephone you, this afternoon. I’ll say a telegram has come for you—as if I were speaking from your home, you understand. You’ll tell me to open it. I’ll say it’s from your sister, that she’s ill and wants you to come to her right away. You’ll explain the situation to Coombs and leave at once—to be gone two or three days. You’ll go home, then, and stay there till you hear from me. I’ll try him out while you’re gone. If he doesn’t fall for me while you’re away, I’ll have a story ready for you when you get back. It’ll explain everything innocently, of course. See? You don’t have anything to do, *now*, but to take my message over the ’phone, tell Coombs you have to leave at once for Schenectady, and go quietly home. Do you understand?”





*After being slighted and ignored by Duff, Mollie Simpson found herself unexpectedly consulted and relied upon.*

She understood, with an eager alacrity. After being ignored by him, she found herself unexpectedly consulted and relied on. It went to her head—as he intended that it should. She asked “What are you going to do?” as wide-eyed as a Joan of Arc prepared to accept her fate, no matter what it might be, with a devoted self-abnegation. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m not quite sure yet,” he said, doubtfully. He thought a moment. “Could you borrow his book on ‘Questioned Documents?’ ”

“Yes.”

“And take it with you? Without letting him know?”

“Ye-e-es.”

“If he’s still here when you return, I’ll find a way to give it an innocent appearance.”

“Are you going to—to frighten him?”

“I’m going to try him out. I don’t quite know how.” He rose, preoccupied, and held out his hand to Mary Bryant. “I’ll have to feel my

way into it. You'll hear from me by telephone. And if you see me anywhere, just pretend that you don't know me. Good-bye. I'll report to you in a day or two. You'd better go out through the file room."

He ushered them to the inner door of his office and handed them over to Mrs. Cooley again.

"I'll 'phone you late this afternoon, Miss Simpson," he said. "You'll leave for Schenectady to-night, and I'll call on Coombs to-morrow."

## II

It was almost midday of a muggy, warm spring morning, when Duff arrived at Mrs. Hefflin's door, and he looked as hot as a big policeman in his winter suit of semi-official dark blue, a double-breasted jacket, a hard bowler hat, and the thick-soled shoes of a patrolman. He had left an operative in an automobile to wait for him at the corner of the street, and he advanced up Mrs. Hefflin's brownstone entrance steps as threateningly as if he had come to serve a summons. He reached out the relentless arm of the law to the bell. He did not merely press the button; he squashed it with his huge thumb. "Coombs," he said to the maid who opened the door. She fell back before him as he shouldered his way in.

"Who wants to see him?" she asked.

"I do," he said. He was standing, with his hat on, looking around him in the manner of suspicious authority.

She asked timidly, "What's the name, please?"

He did not lower his eyes to her. "Hurry up," he growled. "Don't waste my time." He frowned at the closed doors of the drawing room across the hall—double doors of dark walnut, inlaid with a marquetry of lighter wood—and without paying any further heed to her, he went to those doors as if he were making a raid on them, opened them officially, and walked into the drawing room, still with his hat on.

She ran upstairs in a panic.

He knew, of course, that Coombs was in. He had learned *that* from Mary Bryant, by telephone, before he came. He could not tell the maid that he was a policeman; he would be liable, under the law for impersonating an officer; but his pantomime was designed to send her, frightened, to Coombs, with the news that a policeman was downstairs; and, having achieved his effect, he took off his hat, and unbuttoned his coat, and hooked his thumb into his watch pocket.

He was on a carpet so thick and so padded that his big feet sank into it as though he were walking on a feather bed. He was facing a mirror over the mantelpiece—a high mirror, framed in tarnished gilt, over a marble mantel shelf that was full of the majolica and porcelain and Dresden china of a grandmother’s aesthetic impulse. Above him there glittered an old glass chandelier, all silver-frost and crystal, modernized with electric bulbs. There were gilt cornices at the tops of the window frames, and below them hung looped and tasselled layers of curtains and undercurtains and sashcurtains, as many as the petticoats of a reigning belle in the days of crinoline. The room, in fact, was as old-fashioned as Mrs. Hefflin herself, and as well-preserved—with a stuffy odor of rose-leaved decay, sweet and dry—and in the curtained gloom of that ancient magnificence, Duff’s great muscled bulk made him an ominous figure.

It was with an air of very conscious rectitude that Coombs appeared suddenly in the doorway. “What’s the matter?” he asked, and his voice was light and high.

**D**uff looked him over, without replying. Coombs was perhaps thirty-five years old, slight and boyish, in a cheerful spring suit, with a bow tie and a low collar. Sensitive-looking and obviously nervous, he confronted Duff’s silent scrutiny, pale and staring. His eyes as large and dark as a girl’s, were the eyes of a poet, but he was bald; and his cheeks were sunken and his face was lined and wrinkled.

Duff answered, at last, in a low voice: “Come in and shut that door.”

After a moment of hesitation, he came in defiantly but he did not shut the door. “What’s the matter?” he demanded. “You can’t force your way in here like this. This is a private house. What do you want?”

Duff passed him in silence and closed the door. “You’ve had a girl named Mollie Simpson working for you here,” he said, “haven’t you?” And when Coombs did not reply, he asked, “Where’d you get her?”

Coombs, relieved, thrust his hands deep into his trouser pockets. “She answered my advertisement.”

“Did you know anything about her?”

“Certainly not.”

“Where did she say she was going when she left here yesterday?”

“To see a sick relative—a sister—in Schenectady.”

“Sounds phoney,” Duff grumbled. “Do you know whether she’s really got a sister in Schenectady?”

“No.” Coombs frowned. “What *are* you? A detective?”

“Yes.” Duff eyed him balefully. “Did you know she took away a book of yours?”

“A book of *mine*?”

“Yes. A book called ‘Questioned Documents.’ ”

“No! Did she? I missed it this morning. I wondered what—” He had begun by being surprised, not alarmed; but it was on some sudden thought, not merely of surprise, that he stopped in the middle of his sentence.

“That’s a book about forged signatures and fraudulent wills, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he answered, uneasily.

“Did you know that she’s been taking scraps out of your waste basket and piecing them together?”

He shook his head. “No,” he said, rather hoarsely.

“Well, she *has*.” Duff was studying him as coolly as a chemist who adds a reagent to a solution in a test-tube and watches its effect. “She’s been taking scraps out of your waste basket and piecing them together.”

Coombs did not speak; he cleared his throat, but he uttered no word.

“Signatures,” Duff added and Coombs’ eyes that had been fixed in the stare of a scared girl wavered in a horrid apprehension. He turned a sickly green.

Duff took him by the elbow. “Come over here.”

**H**e led the unwilling Coombs to a Victorian sofa by the window—a sofa as beautiful in its lines as the curves of a harp—and forced him to sit in the rounded corner of it. He sat down sideways himself, facing Coombs, still holding him firmly by the elbow and crowding him against the sofa arm with his immense knees.

“That’s all right,” he said, in a tone criminally low and confidential. “Mollie doesn’t mean you any harm. And neither do *I*. We just want to get in on anything you make out of this game. And we’ll help you *make* it. You can’t pull it off alone. It takes experience. I’m not a detective; I’m a lawyer, see? I know more about wills than the guy that invented them. And I’ve got

a clerk—see?—on my staff—a regular Jim the Penman. He can write the old girl's signature so she wouldn't know, *herself*, that it wasn't hers. You can make a lot more money out of this Hefflin Fund than you've *been* making. We can help you there. You tell the old lady you want your accounts audited, and I'll get you an accountant that'll always give you a clean bill, no matter what your books look like. Then you work me in as your legal adviser for the Fund, see? and get me next to Mrs. Hefflin, so's people'll get used to seeing me around, and when she croaks I'll have a will all signed, sealed and delivered, making you and me executors for a Hefflin Fund as big as the Rockefeller Foundation. You won't have to do anything but sit back and take the money. We'll work up all the documents. You can't do it. You don't know how. It's no job for an amateur. You need a professional. That's me."

Coombs, held helpless in the corner of the sofa, had listened, hypnotized. "I don't," he gasped. "I haven't—"

"No, of course," Duff soothed him. "I understand. You've just been playing with the idea. You haven't been planning seriously to carry it out. I understand that. You've nicked a few dollars off your accounts, but that's as far as you've gone. When you ran across this book about forgeries and fake wills, you just tried a few signatures to see if you could make the grade better than the guys in the book. I understand all that. The point is that I need money. So does Mollie. She's my little prospector. She goes out and locates the pay-dirt and I come along later and pan it out. This's a good claim you've got here, but you can't work it without taking us in on it, see? We've got your book and your signatures and a line on the accounts that you've been padding. We don't want to make any trouble for you, but you've either got to play with us or take a tumble. If you turn us down—" Duff chuckled, with a loathsome geniality—"we'll turn you up. We'll report to this Bryant girl. If you want any more of the old dame's money, you've got to share it with *us*. See?"

Coombs looked around him wildly, in search of some way of escape. That was an impulse which Duff did not wish to check.

"All right," he said, "think it over. I don't need to crowd you. Take your own time. I'll come in and see you again, this afternoon. There's no hurry, see? The old girl's good for a few years yet—unless you make up your mind to bump her off. That's up to you." He patted Coombs on the knee and rose cheerfully. "Think it all over. The more you think about it, the more you'll realize why you've got to take us in on it. You need us as much as we need

you. I'll see you later." He put on his hat. "I'll drop in, again, this afternoon."

He glanced back as he opened the door. Coombs sat, crowded into his corner of the sofa, watching him go, so paralyzed with the encounter that he was unable to move as long as Duff was still in sight. Duff nodded good-bye to him—a sinister nod that was a threat and a confirmation.

There was no one in the hall. He let himself out the front door and sauntered back to his operative in the automobile. "We'll wait here a minute or two, Jack," he said, as he climbed into the closed car. "I've lit a fire under a lad in there and I think he's going to bolt."

The operative had been sitting at the steering wheel, like a waiting chauffeur, reading his morning paper. "What's he up to, Chief?" he asked, idly.

"I don't think he knows," Duff said. "I suggested several things to him that he might run into if he went ahead along the road he's on—several things, including murder—and he looked as if he'd climb the fence and take to the fields as soon as I was out of the way. I want to see which way he goes, in case he carries off anything that we'll have to bring back."

The man went on reading his paper. Duff settled himself comfortably in his seat, took up a book from the cushions beside him, and began to turn over the leaves while he waited. The book was Coombs's copy of "Questioned Documents." Duff had obtained it from Mollie Simpson in the hope that he might find on its margins some definite indication of what aspect of fraud and forgery Coombs had been most interested in. He had found nothing. He found nothing now. He turned the pages, in a sort of absent-minded muse, preoccupied with the memory of Coombs's frightened expression of face when he saw himself involved in a conspiracy to steal and forge and perhaps murder.

Duff smiled to himself—a smile of contemptuous pity—with an eye on Mrs. Hefflin's entrance steps.

"Here he comes!" he said.

Coombs hesitated a moment at the door, a suitcase in his hand, an overcoat on his arm. He looked up and down the street, to make sure that Duff was nowhere in sight. "Going traveling, I guess," Duff concluded. "Follow him up to the station, Jack, and see where he buys a ticket for."

Coombs was walking rapidly away from them, in the direction of the Grand Central station. The operative started the car and began to follow slowly at a safe distance. "Wait a minute," Duff said. "Drop me at the house, and as soon as you find out where he's heading for, 'phone me here. Mrs. Newton P. Hefflin. You'll find the number in the book. I want to talk to them before he gets too far on his way."

"All right, Chief."

"Wait till he's around the corner."

As soon as Coombs had disappeared, Duff dropped off, with "Questioned Documents" in his hand, and the car darted ahead again. Duff mounted Mrs. Hefflin's steps for the second time, but now he was as carelessly cheerful as a book agent. He rang a staccato passage on the bell. "Good morning!" he greeted the maid, with a broad conspiring smile. "Miss Bryant's waiting to see me. Tell her I'm here, will you? The name's 'Duff'."

"Well!" she cried, in indignant surprise at this change of manner.

"Yes. Thanks," he said. "Quite well. I hope I see you the same." He bowed his way past her, with a burlesque politeness. "Don't keep Miss Bryant waiting," he added, over his shoulder as he entered the drawing room. "Well!" he heard her say again, as she started up the stairs.

He put his copy of "Questioned Documents" on an old "clover leaf" table between the windows, and covered the book with his hat. He began to pace thoughtfully up and down the room, pursing his lips. After all it was not a satisfactory solution of the case to drive Coombs out on the streets again, and end his charitable administration of the Hefflin Fund, and leave Mrs. Hefflin without the innocent fad that he had found for her.

"I'm afraid I've gone too far," he said, at once to Mary Bryant, as soon as she appeared in the doorway. "I've frightened Coombs into running away. He's up at the Grand Central, now, buying a railroad ticket. One of my men is watching him. He'll 'phone me in a few minutes. I want to talk the thing over with you, and decide what to do."

"How did you frighten him?"

She seated herself placidly on the sofa where Duff had put the screws on Coombs. She folded her hands in her lap. Duff, still pacing up and down the room, gave her a carefully expurgated account of his interview with Coombs. "He's a dreamer," he concluded. "He's been a mamma's boy. His

mother took all the practical business of life out of his hands and left him to his imagination. He's what we call a Narcissan—in love with himself—and he can't take punishment any better than a girl. As soon as he saw himself in danger, he beat it. Now, here's the point. He's capable of dreaming about forging a will for Mrs. Hefflin but he couldn't possibly carry it out, and now that I've turned his dream into a nightmare for him, he'll never think of it again except with horror. I'll guarantee that. He's safer than if he'd never thought of it in the first place, you understand."

"Yes," she said. "I see."

"Well, then," he argued, "it'd be wiser to keep him here than to let him go—better for Mrs. Hefflin, and himself, and these young musicians. We can get the Fund properly administered, so he'll not be tempted to juggle his accounts—"

"But I thought you said he'd run away?"

"I've got an operative with him. He's going to 'phone me here. I'll have him bring Coombs back, if the poor mutt hasn't jumped the first train for Nowhere."

She rose at once. "The telephone's upstairs," she said, "in the library."

**W**ithin a quarter of an hour, Duff, at the drawing room window, saw his operative drive up with Coombs in the car and help him out—as weak and unsteady as if he were being brought home a feeble convalescent, after a month in the hospital. Coombs had bought a ticket for Toronto, Canada, but his train was not to start for an hour, and he had gone to sit in the waiting room while the operative phoned the news to Duff. "Trot him back here," Duff said, "right away. I want to see him." And the operative had brought him back by merely taking him firmly by the upper arm, picking up his suitcase, saying, "Bo, you're wanted. Come along."

It was so that he led Coombs, now, from the automobile to the Hefflin steps, as dumb and as dazed as if he were being marched from Murderers Row to the death house and the electric chair. He looked glassily at Duff when Duff opened the door—without waiting for them to ring—and if he recognized the detective, he showed no recognition in his blank stare. He allowed himself to be passed across the threshold to Duff, stiffly trembling. "All right, Jack," Duff said. "Put his coat and his bag in the hall here and wait out in the car. Come along, Coombs. I want to talk to you."



Coombs allowed himself to be taken into the drawing room and led to the sofa. "Sit down." Duff turned him round. He sat as if his knees had been jerked out from under him. He had his hat on. His hands lay, palms up, limp in his lap. Duff put the hat on them. He drew a long shuddering breath.

"Come out of it," Duff said. "You're all right. Nobody's going to hurt you. I just wanted to throw a scare into you. Some of Mrs. Hefflin's heirs have been worried about what you were doing here, and they paid me to find out. You haven't done anything to go to jail for. Come out of it. Don't be a damn fool."

It was like trying to talk a semi-unconscious man out of a faint.

"I'm not a crook," Duff explained. "I'm a detective. I sent a decoy telegram to your secretary, last night, to get her out of the way, and then I slipped a man in here to go through your desk. *He* stole your copy of 'Questioned Documents'—not the Simpson girl. We figured out that you'd probably been trying your hand at the old lady's signature, so we cooked up that story about piecing together scraps from your waste basket. And we suspected that you'd probably been making something out of the Hefflin Fund, on the side, so we added *that* to our little plant." Some color had begun to return to Coombs' cheeks. He breathed a trembling sigh as his lungs relaxed. "I just wanted to throw a scare into you. I wanted to show you the road you were on, and where it'd probably lead you to, if you didn't jerk yourself up. Nobody knows about it but me. You behave yourself, from now on, and the whole thing'll go no further." Tears of relief had gathered in Coombs's dazed eyes. His lips began to tremble. He wept silently, staring ahead of him, with his face distorted, as shameless as a whimpering child.

**D**uff reached the copy of "Questioned Documents" from the table. "Here," he said. "Put that back where it belongs and we'll say no more about it."

Coombs could not touch the book. Duff laid it on his knees and it fell at once to the floor.

"You go to Mrs. Hefflin and tell her that you want a board of trustees to handle her Fund—a board composed of yourself, and her lawyer, and Miss Bryant. You understand? Then you'll not be able to juggle your accounts. I'll report that I've investigated you and found you all to the good. If you're ever tempted to try any monkey tricks, remember that I'm laying for you and sure to trip you up. Go to it, now, and keep your mouth shut." He put on his hat. "When the Simpson girl gets back here, she'll tell you that the

telegram from her sister was a fake. That's all right. You don't know anything about it, see? Keep your mouth shut and watch your step. Good-bye. I hope I never see you again as long as I live. You make me sick."

He paused in the doorway to give the abject Coombs one last disgusted look. Then he hurried out to his motor car. "Step on it, Jack," he said. "I've got to get back on that Parsons case."

**W**ith the incorporation of the Hefflin Fund and its administration by Mary Bryant and Michael Raffaelli Coombs, the newspapers made Mrs. Newton P. Hefflin famous as a patron of American music and its native composers. There is talk of crowning Coombs before the Academy of Arts and Letters for his services to culture. "Well," Duff says, "it's better than shaving his head and giving him a pair of handcuffs."

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 *Stop Thief* by Harvey J. O'Higgins]