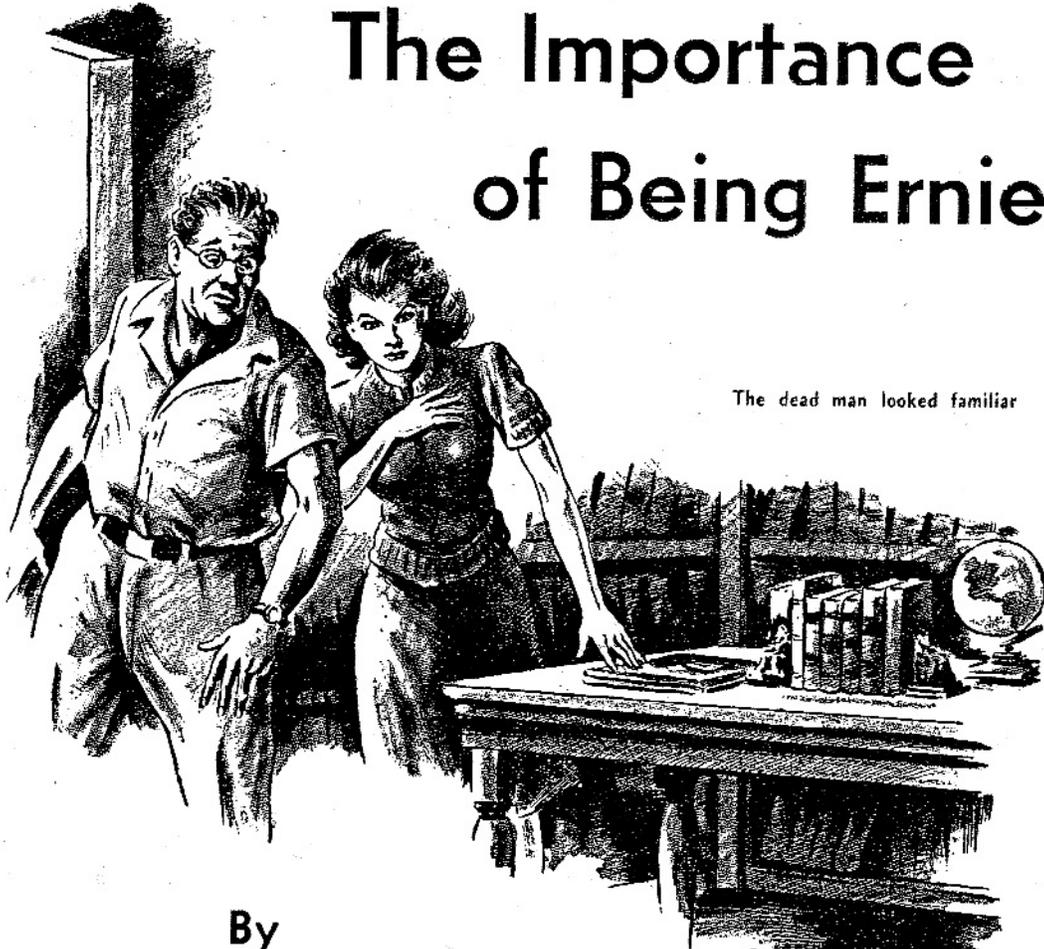


The Importance of Being Ernie



The dead man looked familiar

By
CARROLL JOHN DALY

*They said that he was all
hands and no head, but—*



THE first time I saw Ernie he sat on the high stool bending over his work bench, juggling a chess piece in his long slender fingers. Then he looked up at the brisk middle-aged man with the waxed mustaches.

"A knight," Ernie said, holding it up to the light. "Very nicely carved. Italian workmanship you say. No, sir, I'm not interested in doing a complete set of chess

men for you at any price. On and off it would take months, not counting the polishing. It would have to be a labor of—of friendship, and I don't have friends—not any more."

When the man had gone Ernie walked over and took the Dresden lamp out of my hands, examined it critically; noted the missing handle and the nick at the base.

"Sure, sure, mister," he said. "If it can

be done with the hands, I can do it. Not a very fine piece this; could be replaced at an auction for less than the cost of fixing it up. Sentiment?"

Maybe I reddened. A hard-headed business man does not like to be called sentimental. I said:

"I retired and bought a little place here across the street from the public library. This lamp is the last of the old things. I like to have it around. I'm willing to pay more than—"

"All right," he interrupted me as he put the lamp gently on a shelf. "It won't cost you too much." He made out a tag, saying as he wrote, "Mr. Norton, of the little white house."

I was to learn a lot about Ernie in the next three years. All hands and no head they said in town. But he had a heart. Hours of his time were spent repairing dolls for children who would have no other doll—no matter how expensive. If you valued something in money alone, you might as well not bring it to Ernie. But you needed very little money or none at all if your attachment was simply sentiment, and if the loss inside of you, as Ernie put it, was desperate.

"It isn't all sentiment," Ernie told me once. "Sometimes it's fear. That's why people come to me to make keys. Keys they lost they shouldn't have lost. Like a lad in a bank or a jewelry store or a trusted watchman, perhaps."

ONE day a year or so later when I visited Ernie, before going to the library, he pointed to the book in my hand.

"Detective story, eh? Used to read them but I got so I knew who the murderer was before I was half through the book. That took the interest away. No head, eh?" he chuckled but I could see it rankled with him. "You tell me about that book, and like as not I'll name the killer for you. I'm

gifted that way."

I did and he spotted the murderer by the time I had listed all the suspects.

"But," I said before I left. "You may have read that book—and forgotten you read it, I mean. I'll be getting a new mystery tomorrow at the library. Miss Anna May is varnishing it today."

"Perhaps that was it," he said slowly, and looking out his side window on the date garden across the lane, "What'll be the name of the detective story Miss Anna May is holding for you?"

I told him, and went up to the library. It was a few minutes after two o'clock and Miss Anna May came scurrying up. She greeted me in her cheerful way. I followed her into the library and watched her go into the back room behind her desk to hang up her jacket. I could see her shadow moving back and forth through the crack in the knotty pine.

That, I guess, was the start of Ernie using his head—at least so far as murder mysteries were concerned. Many times I would read the books and tell the stories to Ernie, and he'd rattle off the identity of the killer with a monotonous regularity. Sometimes he'd get as many as six out of eight and often the other two on a second guess—or reflection as he called it.

I discussed it once with Chief Hanover of the local police and, to my indignation, he laughed at me when I suggested he would do well to consult with Ernie on his crime problems.

"Hands and heart—yes, I'll grant you that, Mr. Norton," the chief told me. "But Ernie hasn't any head—never had."

Then there was my life-long friend Marvin Hines, of the Hines Detective Agency, now also retired, who spent his winters at Palm Springs a few miles up the line from Cino and who used to play chess with me once a week. He fancied himself somewhat as a psychologist and that was

the way he laughed off my praise—my continued praise of Ernie's detective abilities.

"Clues?" Marvin scoffed. "Nine times out of ten clues are products of the imagination, George. In the detective business it's foot work, not head work. A lot of questions and a lot of answers, and the stupidity of the criminal furnishes the solution, rather than the brilliancy of the detective—that, and certainly all kinds of luck."

"All right," I kept at him. "You're a detective. How does Ernie do it then—for he does do it."

"I don't know." Marvin grinned at me. "Perhaps you present the cases from the books well—too well," and when I denied that vehemently, "I mean subconsciously, George. You like the old man. You know he gets a kick out of being important. In fact, you've told me it has added years to his life, just to find someone who believes he can use his head—as well as his hands."

Cino was a desert town in winter. I was a fortunate man indeed. The days passed pleasantly. I could stand at my window and watch Miss Anna May hurry, each afternoon at two o'clock, up to the public library door. I could see her again at nine pull down the shades and carefully tuck in the drapes before she left for the night.

One afternoon I stood by my window, a couple of books under my arm, waiting for Miss Anna May to come up Oasis Street and open the library. She came, turning into Oasis from Fargo Avenue, almost skipping across the street for she was three minutes late.

I left the window as Miss Anna May went into the library and was opening my front door when she came out again.

She was not then the neat efficient little lady I had seen a minute before. Her hair was disheveled as if she had run a hand hastily through it. Her blue sweater was

open at the neck as she clutched it with her left hand. Her right hand went up and swept the glasses from her nose as if they blocked her vision. Only the thin gold chain saved them from destruction. She stood on the library steps, the door open behind her, her mouth hanging open, as if she were intending to scream. Yet no sound came. Then I was across the street, to her.

THINGS were a little hectic after that. I know Miss Anna May pointed into the library and I know I looked and saw the man lying there on the floor by the magazine table. There was a long bladed knife sticking out of his back; almost the middle of his back. I know that his face was familiar, that I had seen him in town—but I wasn't quite sure where.

By the time I reached the door again, old Mr. Shultz, who worked a good deal in his garden, had come up from the corner. Mrs. Fisher was there, and a lady with her hair up in curlers who must have been Mrs. Raskin. One thought was in my mind. Ernie. Here was a chance for Ernie to vindicate himself—and me! I did tell Miss Anna May, who had now found her voice and was telling everyone of the shock she had; not to touch anything and to call the police. Then I was around the side of the library and running down the lane to Ernie's shop in the front room of his shack.

Ernie protested all the way back to the library but he came. The police were there when we pushed through the little knot of people in the doorway. Two officers from a prowl car, a state trooper and Chief Hanover himself. Even as we paused in the doorway, young Doctor Martin Ferris brushed by us, for I suppose in a way he was the coroner while his father was ill.

Chief Hanover looked up sharply, smiled at me for, being retired and having a balance at the bank, I rated a bit in Cino. Then he saw Ernie and the smile went. He

said abruptly:

“Come, come! We can’t have the whole town cluttering up the place. You’re different, Mr. Norton—having found the body, in a manner of speaking. Outside, Ernie!”

I’m not sure exactly what I said. Afterward Miss Anna May told me I did very well and was very dignified, but I know I said something about the Chief not being above having help from a man “qualified—I might say eminently qualified—in crimes of violence, if things go wrong.”

The chief muttered about the dead man being Mr. Porter—Emile Porter from the bank—and that we’d need all our wits about us. He looked at the dead man again and evidently decided that he wasn’t going to have it said he refused help. Anyway he made no further, at least outright, objection to Ernie.

Ernie held his ground, even advanced cautiously into the room. The state trooper grinned at me. Doctor Ferris put down his bag and knelt by the body.

“Wrong, wrong?” Chief Hanover said but there was no confidence in his voice for he was evidently ill equipped to cope with a crime of this kind. “Things won’t go wrong. But he’s been dead some time and the killer has a start. And what was Mr. Porter doing in the library in the night—for it was in the night, wasn’t it, Doctor?”

Miss Anna May in the background, “Mr. Porter was chairman of the Library Board, which you well know, Chief Hanover. He had a key as all board members have—and he had a right to be in the library at any time day or night, I should think.”

“Dead twelve hours,” said Doctor Ferris without looking up. “Maybe more—hardly less. Died instantly—knife severed his spinal cord, I think.”

We stood around while the doctor

examined the body gingerly, and the Chief, less gingerly, went through the dead man’s pockets. More people crowded in at the library door until the Chief sent one of the uniformed men to keep them outside. Only Ernie moved around. I was a little proud of the way he went to work. He behaved as if he knew exactly what he was doing and exactly what he was looking for. Occasionally he examined a book shelf, and once he pulled out a book.

Then I saw the magnifying glass—a rather large one on a long handle. I saw him examine ashes, evidently tobacco ashes on a shelf; and more ashes on the floor. He knelt down in true Sherlock Holmes fashion and went over the floor crawling about with the glass close to his right eye and his right eye close to the floor. Then he found a small thread—a tiny bit of lint near the dead man’s hand.

“Well,” said the chief irritably, “what’s that? Haven’t solved things, have you?”

“Solved things?” There was a smile on Ernie’s lips and a light in his round black eyes. “No, not quite.” He held up the thread. “I must find the button that was torn from the murderer’s coat. That this is part of the material, I have no doubt.” And as the chief started to speak, “No, no—let us reconstruct the crime as it happened, for we know how it happened. Then, perhaps, we can locate the missing button.”

A LONG pause followed; then Ernie began, his voice gaining in confidence as he talked:

“Gentlemen: Mr. Porter came to the library for a purpose. It was to meet the man who so foully murdered him—whether by appointment or to confront him with some accusation, is, for the moment, entirely speculative. Mr. Porter arrived first. He walked up and down smoking a cigarette. The ashes on the floor tell us that. Then he went to the book case and drew

out this book. The marks of it being dragged through some ash he inadvertently dropped upon the shelf tells us that." Ernie went to the shelf again and pulled out a large book. " 'Glacial Foundations,' " he read the title aloud. "But Mr. Porter was not interested in the contents of the book. At least, he was not interested in the literary contents of the book—but he was interested in this."

Ernie held the book up, riffled the pages and shook it. A number of bills fell to the floor; fifties and hundreds. There was two thousand dollars all told when the amazed Chief Hanover got through counting the money.

"But," Ernie shook his head, "I do not believe Mr. Porter was interested in the money, for he did not remove it from the book and place it in his own pocket. I think the money was put there for the murderer. Mr. Porter somehow knew that—and was waiting to confront the man when he came for the money. What a fine way for one crook to pass money to another crook without meeting him or ever seeing him or being seen with him. And what a book—'Glacial Foundations'—not apt to be read in a desert library. But—we must find the missing button."

Suddenly Ernie knelt on the floor again, not far from the body and, with his pen knife, pried loose a small board. It came up easily. His hand went inside and appeared almost at once with a button and a bit of cloth—expensive brown cloth attached to that button, as if it had been violently torn from some garment.

"But Ernie," I gasped. "I know that board was loose but it had been fixed. How did the button get there?"

Ernie smiled and nodded at me.

"Look," he said, dropping the board back in place. "The killer came up behind Mr. Porter with the knife under his coat. Under his top coat, for the night was chilly

enough to warrant one. He was a small man—say five feet seven or eight. He struck upwards with the knife, his left foot coming forward like this to lend force to the blow. So. . ."

Ernie's left foot stamped forward and the board bounced up, hung so a few seconds, then settled back again.

"You see," said Ernie. "Mr. Porter reached back spasmodically—tore off the button, received the knife in his back and fell forward. The button was knocked from his hand, and rolled into the opening just before the board settled down again."

"Ernie is right, Chief," Doctor Ferris said. "The blow came from below. So the man must have been smaller than the corpse here—Porter was well over six feet."

"Come, Mr. Norton," Ernie said to me. "I noticed signs outside of a car in the lane by the library, near the far window with the hole in the shade. Let us see what we can find there."

This time we had an audience that the police kept only partially back. Ernie found the cigar butt almost at once in the hedge. He smelled it—examined it carefully, flattened it out between his fingers; put the magnifying glass carefully on it, talking to himself. He was saying:

"Expensive tobacco—very. No teeth marks—none at all. Most extraordinary. Ah!" He snapped his fingers. "Why would a man step forward before he struck the fatal blow? Wouldn't he simply bend both knees slightly and then . . . But of course! He stepped forward on his good leg."

"On his good leg," gasped the chief. "Did he have a bad one?"

"Undoubtedly," said Ernie. "That's quite clear. He had a wooden leg."

ERNIE FACED the pop-eyed chief, the bewildered trooper, and the smiling doctor—and I guess the gloating me—for I was very, very proud of Ernie, he finished

it off in great style.

“There you are, Chief,” he said, “and please leave me out of it. Your murderer was a heavy set man with powerful arms; witness the force of the blow he struck with the knife. There is a button missing from an expensive brown top coat. The killer had a wooden leg—I would say it was the left one. He smoked cigars that could hardly cost less than a dollar each and were made to order for him. Also he had no teeth; at least he wore no teeth last night. So we must assume he is temporarily without them or has something wrong with his mouth that forbids the use of store teeth.”

“Good lord!” gasped the chief. “Blair Henderson, of Palm Springs. One leg, no teeth, no doubt has his cigars rolled in Pedro’s Tobacco Shop, and yes—there are rumors that he runs wet Mexicans across the border—hundreds of them—thousands of them maybe.” He looked at the book. “Glacial Foundations,” he still held in his hand. “So that is how they made the payoff. But what was Emile Porter doing in the library with him?”

“Really.” Ernie smiled indulgently; then went on as if he was addressing a child; “Does it matter. We know Porter was here and that he was killed and who killed him. The assumption is Mr. Porter was either in on the racket and was a threat to Henderson, or he suspected something and wished to verify his suspicions before going to the police. But that is guessing—and I never like to guess. Good day, gentlemen. Come on. George.” He led me away.

It was the first time in our long acquaintance, friendship I would like to think of it if Ernie ever gave his friendship to anyone, that he had ever called me “George” and I rather liked it. Yes, I liked it a lot.

That evening Blair Henderson was arrested at his Palm Springs estate. He

listened attentively to what the authorities had to say, for he was a prominent and a wealthy man. But the description of how he committed the murder and his actions during the brutal killing broke him entirely. He went to his room to pack a bag—and took poison. Then he smoked one of his dollar cigars and before he died, calmly confessed to the murder, pointing out quite clearly that Emile Porter was an honest but a foolish man.

I’ll admit I gloated quite unashamedly to Marvin Hines when he returned from his trip east. He sat there looking at me with that unbelieving grin that I slowly but surely wiped from his face. Once he interrupted with “impossible and preposterous” and then after enumerating each clue and the conclusion Ernie drew from it, I leaned back and said:

“Did Ernie get that out of my subconscious mind—out of the kindness of my heart. I was the only one who believed in Ernie—and now I’ve been vindicated.”

“But,” Marvin objected, “Ernie might have reached anyone of a hundred conclusions from those clues while the ones he did reach—”

“Led directly to the murderer and a confession.” I laid it on thick. “Come now, Marvin; what do you say to that?”

“I can’t believe it,” he said and then lost five games of chess right in a row.

IT WAS two weeks before I saw Marvin again. In the meantime I had entertained the mayor, half the common council, the other two members of the library board and, yes, Chief Hanover himself. They wanted to do something in the way of honoring Ernie. Money, a cup—a testimonial—but Ernie would have none of it. They wanted me to talk to Ernie. They were calling on him again Saturday night at eight o’clock to make a last plea. I didn’t promise. I was glad I didn’t. For the next

time I had a talk with Ernie, he said:

"It's over with and forgotten. I'm going to read mystery stories again and not try to solve them," and after a pause: "What I did, I did for you—at least I did it that way for you, George. Let us forget it. Like a dream. . A good dream when I think of you—a bad dream when I think of myself."

Marvin Hines came down that Saturday evening early, and we had dinner in the Desert Cafe, on Palm Dale Road. Marvin was very somber and listened to me tell about the officials calling on Ernie that night without changing expression or interrupting me. When dinner was over and I was about to rise, he leaned over and took my arm.

"Sit down, George," he said. "When I retired from the detective business, I never wanted to hear of crime again. But I've taken a bus man's holiday these last two weeks and have been debating with myself if I should tell you or not. We all have our pride. You and Ernie—and I, but it isn't pride that makes me speak now." Suddenly he leaned forward and whispering the words in a low husky voice, though no one was near our booth: "You've been fooled, George—taken in. So has the police chief and the mayor and the whole town. That's right, George. Ernie deceived you all."

"You mean Blair Henderson didn't kill Porter. But he confessed! He—"

"No, no, I don't mean that. Take it easy now. You're not going to like it. I mean, first, that Ernie never solved those crimes in books for you. He knew the answers because he looked in the back of the books before you ever read them."

"But he couldn't. I got the books from the library before anyone else had them."

He shook his head, said:

"Do you remember telling me that Ernie made keys; often secretly, for people who shouldn't have lost them? Did he ever tell you he made one for the librarian, Miss

Anna May Cotes?" (It was the first time I had ever heard Miss Anna May's last name.) "Of course he didn't, and neither did she. But she told me—though she doesn't know she did. Ernie made an extra key for himself and, late at night, he'd slip into the library and into the room behind the desk and look in the back of the mystery books on which the varnish was drying. It was as simple as that. I guess then he just wanted to be important to you?"

"No, no, I can't believe it!" I protested. .But when I looked at Marvin I did believe it, 'and even then not wanting to believe it, I said: "But the murder of Porter—the real murder? How could Ernie know about that? He couldn't look in the back of the book. He couldn't find that in the room behind the desk in the library."

"But he did," Marvin nodded. "For he was in that room when the murder took place. He saw it through a knot hole. I know for I looked through that hole myself the other day. Ernie lived here in the desert for over forty years and must have known Blair Henderson well—so his description of him; his wooden leg, absence of teeth, size and build. The killing, of course, was all too sudden for Ernie to prevent it. But he saw it just as he described it—though I think he planted the button under the loose board and the ashes on the book shelf himself. I do know, though, that he went to Palm Springs that morning before the body was discovered and to the tobacco shop and found out about the high-priced cigars Blair Henderson had made to order for him. But if Porter tore that button off Henderson's coat—or, if Ernie tore it off while the coat was in Henderson's parked car some place in Palm Springs after the killing, I don't know. That must come from Ernie himself. I am only an ordinary working detective, with no books to look in the back of."

“We’ll find out!” I came to my feet. My hands were shaking. “We’ll go and ask Ernie—now.”

“Now? While those others—the officials—are there?” Marvin looked at his watch.

“Yes, while they are there. I—I think that is right, Marvin.”

“Maybe,” said Marvin. “But if that’s the way you want it, it’s right.”

INDIGNATION — bewilderment — had overcome me, but mostly it was a hurt, a lump, a moving, rolling ball down in the bottom of my stomach.

We came upon Ernie’s little shack with the shop in front through the alley, back of Railroad Avenue. The window on the side was open and the curtains parted, and there was a light over Ernie’s work bench. Ernie was talking to a small group of men who stood there. They were the same ones who had come to see me. Marvin and I hesitated, stopped, and pulled up close to the window. Ernie was saying:

“—I didn’t mind you all saying I couldn’t use my head. And I used it, not because you laughed at me, but because you laughed at Mr. Norton for believing in me. Mr. Norton visited me first because I was a lonely old man. Then he liked me. Then he believed in me—and if he hadn’t believed in me, Emile Porter would be dead and buried and his murderer a free man—free to kill again. So, you go and honor Mr. Norton. I’ve got all the honor I’ll ever want or need.” His head came up sharply and his chin shot out. “It’s George Norton’s belief in me.” Ernie walked to the door at the back of the shop. “Good night,

gentlemen,” he said. “I never want to hear a word about it again.”

The door closed almost gently and Ernie disappeared behind it.

The men stood silently looking at each other, shaking their heads. There was no laughter. Ernie was an important man now.

I was walking away, up the lane by the library and across the street to my own house where the light shone on the porch, a little blurred it seemed, though it may have been my vision. I felt Marvin’s hand on my arm. “I guess,” I said, “Ernie did it for me—because of me.”

“Yes, I guess he did,” Marvin said.

“He’s not a bad old man. Rather a—rather a—”

“Rather a fine old man, George. Yes, he is.”

“Perhaps he’s right. I mean about never hearing of it—again.”

“Yes, if that’s how you want it, George, it’s right. He . . . Hello, what’s this?”

I picked up the box before the door and carried it inside with me. I hardly knew I was opening it as I placed it on the table. Then I saw the men. The chess men—the polished wood, the finely carved pieces that must have taken days, even months, of work and—and—there was the card. It read simply:

To my friend, George.

Ernie.

That night it was my turn to lose five straight games to Marvin. But my thoughts were not unpleasant. I’m not a young man. I’ve lived a long time. Two friends—two real friends! That’s a lot even in a long life. A whole lot.