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Spence was shooting when Big Joe's face came into view again

# Guinea Pig Money

By BENTON BRADEN

***Blackie thought he had a good racket if his experiment worked—but he based his trust on faulty reasoning!***

PHIL SPENCE, sergeant-of-detectives, was red-faced, smarting, as he came from the commissioner's office. Spence, with other detectives, had received a blistering from the commissioner because a series of crimes, ranging from a snatch to hit-and-run cases, had gone unsolved.

The newspapers had landed on the department, and the commissioner had taken it out on the dicks. Spence was sore. He had been working his head off, trying to get leads on some of those cases.

He went on down to his office, recognized the big, fat, round-faced lady who was sitting by his desk. Mrs. Moriaty had been the victim of a hit-and-run artist. She was a loud-mouthed woman and she had expressed her opinion in brightly colored phrases when the cops hadn't been able to grab the man who hit her.

Spence figured he was in for it again. Mrs. Moriaty could lay it on in harsher

terms than the commissioner. But this was one case on which Spence had a good lead and he knew he would have that driver in a few hours.

"Good morning, Mrs. Moriaty." Spence spoke quickly to beat her to the punch. "Now I can promise you that we'll have the man within twenty-four hours. When we get him we'll make an example of him that will keep others from doing the same thing. So you just give us twenty-four hours more—and we'll have your man in a cell."

Mrs. Moriaty didn't react as Spence had expected. She didn't raise her shrill voice and bawl him out for not showing her results instead of making promises. Her attitude seemed restrained, almost demure. "Sergeant," she said slowly, "I've been thinking things over. After all, I wasn't really injured in that accident. I didn't have a single bone broken. I really wasn't hurt at all."

"No thanks to the guy that hit you," Spence said shortly. "He smacked you and rolled you into the gutter, didn't he? Then stepped on it and got away as fast as he could. You might have been laid up in a hospital for months. We're going to make it hot for that bird—whether you were hurt bad or not."

Mrs. Moriaty didn't show any enthusiasm. She rolled her eyes a little.

"Sergeant," she said, "I just wish you'd—drop that case. I don't want to press the charges. The way things have worked out—I'd rather drop the whole thing."

Spence stared at her. He knew what he was up against now. A fix! The man who had hit her had become frightened. He was afraid he might be caught later. So he had sneaked around and squared things with her, hoping he could hush the whole matter up. Spence began to get a bit mad.

"So you want to drop the case, do you, Mrs. Moriaty? Yesterday you were in here, reading the riot act to us and yelling for blood. Now you're doing a complete about-face. I know the answer to that. This guy made a contact with you, didn't he? I'll bet he slipped you fifty or a hundred bucks to make you change your tune. Isn't that a good guess?" Mrs. Moriaty suddenly smiled broadly.

She opened her mouth and spoke loudly—but not in vituperation.

"I'll say he did!" she yelled exultantly.

"That guy came across and he came across in a big way. Look!" She brought her hand out from her purse and waved a big roll of currency. "Five hundred bucks, Spence. That's more dough than I ever saw in one piece in my whole life. Five hundred smackers he gave me—and me with hardly a bruise on me. Soft, huh? I'd let him brush a fender off on me every day for that kind of money."

Spence frowned unhappily. He knew he was going to pick that driver up, but it might be hard to get a conviction if Mrs. Moriaty behaved this way before a jury.

"I told you we were going to land this man, Mrs. Moriaty," he said sternly. "When we do we'll expect you to help us prosecute him."

"Prosecute him?" Mrs. Moriaty's big body shook with laughter. "You think I'm crazy? You think I'm going to prosecute Santa Claus? Well, you got another guess coming. This guy just lost his head, that's all. He must really be a pretty nice man. He said he didn't care so much about himself but he was trying to keep his wife and family from being disgraced."

"I get it," Spence said in disgust. "Before he gave you that five hundred he made you promise to lay down on the case. He made you—"

"He didn't!" she denied. "I didn't even see him. I don't know who he is. I just

received a big brown envelope through the mail and it had this five hundred bucks in twenty-dollar bills in it—and a note."

"You've got the note with you?"

"Sure. You can read it if you want to."

Spence took the sheet of paper she handed him. It was written in longhand and the penmanship was very good. It was mostly a sob story.

THE writer had a loving wife and three babies and he didn't want them to suffer because of his thoughtlessness in running away from the accident. The letter concluded by hoping the enclosed five hundred dollars would square things. There was a promise of more money if Mrs. Moriaty's injuries proved to be more serious than newspaper accounts had indicated.

"You can see how I feel about it now, Sergeant," Mrs. Moriaty said, clutching her five hundred in great satisfaction. "Why should I pour it on a guy that tried to do the right thing? So far as I'm concerned he never hit me at all."

"We're going to get that lad!" Spence said flatly. "We're going to prosecute him and send him to jail."

Mrs. Moriaty flushed angrily. "Well, you can count me out!" she declared loudly. "I hope you never catch him, you bungling flatfoot!"

With that she got up and flounced out of the office.

Spence smiled grimly. He knew he was going to have the last word in the case. He had a witness that he had kept under cover. That witness had identified the hit-and-run car as an old blue coupe. And he got the last two numbers on the license tag. With that dope it was no more than a matter of routine to find that driver. They'd have him any minute now.

It was just an hour later when Logan, one of Spence's assistants, marched a heavy-set man with a mean face into the office.

"Here he is, Sergeant," Logan announced. "Your hit-and-run artist. Name of Dan Steffen. Works in a mill as a laborer. We caught him in that same old blue coupe he was driving when he hit Mrs. Moriaty."

"How about it, Steffen," Spence asked. "You admit it?"

Steffen's face twisted.

"Yeah, I admit it," he grunted.

"Why didn't you stop after you hit Mrs. Moriaty?" Spence questioned.

"Because I was in for it either way. I had a pretty good snootful when I had the accident. I figured I wouldn't get any more for a hit-and-run than I would for drunken driving."

"Then you sat down and wrote Mrs. Moriaty a letter—trying to square things?"

Steffen stared a bit stupidly.

"I didn't write no letter to nobody," he said sullenly.

Spence blinked at that answer. It didn't add up. If Steffen had sent that money to Mrs. Moriaty he would most certainly admit it and claim it as a mitigating fact in his favor.

"You married, Steffen?"

"No."

"Are you in a position to help Mrs. Moriaty out, pay her damages for the injuries she suffered?"

"Nah." Steffen shook his head. "I ain't worked for three weeks. I only got seven dollars to my name."

"But you own and operate a car."

"I bought that car in a junk yard four years ago and fixed it up with spare parts so it would run. It ain't worth fifty bucks. Tires are about gone."

Spence was thoughtful for a moment. Then he leaned forward and said,

"Sit down in that chair, Steffen. Take that pen there and write out a statement of

the accident and what you did afterward."

Steffen obeyed. He screwed his face into a painful expression and wrote awkwardly and with great effort. When he had finished and signed his name, Spence took the statement and read it. Every other word was misspelled. The handwriting did not even faintly resemble the neat script in the letter Mrs. Moriaty had received with the five hundred dollars of conscience money.

Spence questioned Steffen some more and then had him taken away.

"This is one for the book, Logan," he said to his assistant, after they had discussed the case. "There is no doubt whatever that Steffen is the man who actually ran Mrs. Moriaty down and then beat it. Steffen couldn't have written that letter Mrs. Moriaty received. We know he didn't have any five hundred dollars to donate to her."

"You could take one look at Steffen," Logan agreed, "and know he'd never donate five C's to anybody—even if he had it. Now who could have been interested enough in that case to have parted with so much good dough?"

"Some smart lad, Logan. Some smart lad with a smart purpose."

Mrs. Moriaty started out on her spending spree the next morning. In great good humor, smiling from ear to ear, she went from one store to another. Every time she made a purchase she pulled out her roll with a flourish and paid with twenty-dollar bills. She had parted with almost three hundred dollars when she decided she had better save some of it for a possible rainy day. So at last she went into the Corner Savings Bank and deposited two hundred dollars.

Mrs. Moriaty didn't notice that she had been trailed during her journey by a slender, dark-complexioned man in a checked suit. Or that after she returned home that man took up a position across and down the street, from where he could observe the entrance to the flat building in which she lived.

She wouldn't expect, of course, that the donor of that five hundred would have the slightest interest in how she spent the money. That wouldn't have anything to do with his conscience.

NOT long after Mrs. Moriaty returned home Sergeant Spence came strolling along that same street. From his manner he seemed to be just whiling away the time. He showed no particular interest in anything until he came abreast of the slender, black-eyed man. Then he stopped. His eyes lighted in recognition.

"Well, if it isn't Blackie Sturn," he said pleasantly. "Imagine meeting you here. Haven't seen you, Blackie, since I picked you up for a stick-up more than a year ago. Too bad I couldn't make it stick."

"Blackie" didn't smile, didn't seem to enjoy the meeting.

"You couldn't make it stick because I wasn't guilty," he retorted. "You can't stick a guy when he makes a habit of stickin' strictly to his own business."

"And just what does your business happen to be at the moment, Blackie!" Spence asked.

"I'm not doin' anything right now. I'm out of work. Lookin' for a job."

"Are Big Joe Hamlin and Sniffy Blade out of work, too? I suppose you're still palling around with them?"

"I ain't see either of them for weeks," Blackie denied.

"I've got half a notion to pinch you, Blackie," Spence said. "Just for old times' sake."

"You ain't got a thing on me! You can't pinch me for doin' nothing."

"I don't know about that, Blackie,"

Spence said easily. “Now I could pinch you for hit-and-run.”

Blackie’s eyes flicked just a little. “What hit-and-run?”

“A Mrs. Moriaty, Blackie. She lives just across the street. She was knocked down by a driver who kept right on going. And here I find you standing across the street, almost as though you were—watching.”

“I ain’t watching nothing,” Blackie said quickly. “I never heard of no dame with a name like that.”

“Then you’re acting very peculiarly, Blackie.” Sergeant Spence’s tone changed. “Because you’ve been tailing her around all morning. You watched her as she went into certain stores. You watched her make a deposit at a bank. There’s no use disputing it because one of my men picked you up and watched *you*.”

“That’s a joke,” Blackie said. “It just happened by accident if I did. Why would I be tailing around a dame I never heard of?”

“To see how she spent that dough that you sent her, Blackie. Mrs. Moriaty received an anonymous letter in the mail. In it was enclosed five hundred dollars in twenty-dollar bills. It seems that the man who ran her down was stricken with remorse and wanted to square things—and save his own hide.”

“When did that accident happen?” Blackie asked quickly.

“Last Tuesday. About four in the afternoon.”

“Tuesday, huh?” Blackie thought for a few seconds. “You can’t hang that on me. I haven’t even got a car. And I can prove that I was in a certain dump drinking beer all that afternoon. I never hit that Mrs. Moriaty.”

“I know that, Blackie. Because we’ve already got the guy that did the hit-and-run job. But we’ve found out that he didn’t send Mrs. Moriaty that five hundred dollars. Somebody else sent it. Now that was a puzzler. Somebody who had nothing to do with the accident sent Mrs. Moriaty that money. Why?”

“It was some nut that read about the accident,” Blackie suggested.

“Or some smart guy, Blackie. Some smart guy who got the impression, from the newspaper accounts, that the hit-and-run artist would never be caught. And saw an opportunity to use Mrs. Moriaty as a guinea pig. The guy who had that money suspected that it might be very hot, possibly marked, and he got this bright idea.

“If Mrs. Moriaty could spend that dough in the stores,” continued Spence, “deposit part of it in a bank, without having the F.B.I. come down on her, he could be pretty sure that he could spend the rest of the money freely.”

Blackie was trying to smile unconcernedly, but his smile was tight and drawn.

“What money?”

“My guess is that it was the twenty-five grand that was paid over by Edward Markham when his twelve-year-old son was snatched. Markham played ball with the snatchers, didn’t report to the cops until he got his son back. As a matter of fact he was on the level about the money. The twenty-dollar bills he handed over weren’t marked at all. But you didn’t know that, Blackie. You and Big Joe and Sniffy. You didn’t dare spend that dough until you were sure it was okay. So you used Mrs. Moriaty to—”

“You’re nuts, Spence! You can’t pin that job on us!”

“I think I can, Blackie, now that I know who did the job. Little Eddie Markham is a pretty smart kid. The three of you wore masks all the time you were in his presence. But he had you tabbed for

size pretty well."

"There are thousands of guys about my size."

"You and Big Joe and Sniffy had slits in your masks for your eyes and mouths, didn't you? Little Eddie could see your mouths—and your teeth when you talked. He said the big man had two prominent gold fillings at the left side of his mouth. The tallest man had very yellow teeth with one that was almost black in the center. How about you, Blackie? You're the slender man. How about that lower plate of yours that keeps bouncing up on you when you talk? It stands out like a—"

BLACKIE's hand moved. At first Spence thought he was reaching for a gun but Blackie's hand went up above his head in an odd gesture. And Spence, in spite of the fact that he had thought Blackie was alone in the street, knew it was a signal to someone. Spence caught that arm as it came down, spun Blackie around, hugged him tight so he couldn't use his arms. Then Spence looked up the street.

The help was corning from a car and it was corning fast. Spence saw the face of the man who was leaning out of the car. It was "Big Joe" Hamlin. Big Joe was bringing a gun over to get in position for a shot. Spence jumped into a stairway, dragging Blackie with him. He got out his gun and quickly tapped Blackie over the head.

Spence flattened against the wall of the areaway, held his gun ready to shoot, propping Blackie before him.

He saw the hood of the car appear. He was shooting when Big Joe's face came into view again. Big Joe shot too and his lead tore into the stairs in front of Spence. Blackie slid slowly to the steps. Logan, who had been planted across the street, was taking a hand in it. Another dick, stationed on down the street, was in action too. The car went on by. Spence moved to the sidewalk and emptied his gun.

He saw a tire blow out. The car weaved crazily and caromed into a truck. Big Joe and Sniffy had had enough. They had their hands up as they staggered down to the pavement. Big Joe's right arm was hanging awkwardly. Sniffy took two steps, then dropped to his knees, and stayed there.

Spence dragged Blackie out from the stairway entrance. Logan had run up to the car to take charge of Big Joe and Sniffy.

"Not bad, not bad," Spence muttered as he shook life back into Blackie. "We've cracked two cases at once, one big one and one little one. Even the commissioner can't squawk on that."