

Secrets

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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I WAS FIRST ATTRACTED to her by her attitude toward the picture. Taken altogether, it measured up better than that of any other person who had been submitted to the test. I can see even now her gaze of frank interest and curiosity and her quick questioning glance at me as I sat watching her out of the corner of my eye, finding an unusual difficulty in regarding her with that attitude of calm and impartial analysis which, in my opinion, a lawyer should always maintain toward his client.

First of all, perhaps I had better explain about the picture.

It was my own idea. From the day that I opened my law offices on William Street I had been keenly conscious of one of the greatest handicaps under which an attorney labors: the difficulty of getting a line on the character of the client.

This is more important than a layman would suppose—and particularly so with lawyers like myself, who make it a rule never to defend the confessedly or

obviously guilty. In many cases it is next to impossible to form a sensibly correct judgment.

When a man is placed in a position where he finds it necessary to seek legal advice and aid, his mind is usually so disturbed and disarranged by his perplexities that all ordinary tests for the reading of character are rendered useless.

The picture was more a happy accident than any result of my own ingenuity or wisdom. I came across it by chance in the studio of an artist friend who was possessed of an extravagant interest in the bizarre and unique.

Its subject has nothing to do with the story, and I shall not attempt to describe it. It is enough to say that it portrayed with frank naturalism and a taste of genius one of the most fundamental of the elements of human nature and experience, without being either distasteful or offensive.

No sooner had I seen it, and realized the effect of the shock which I had felt in every corner of my brain, than I knew that here at last was the very thing I wanted. My friend was loath to part with it until I explained the reason for my desire; and men, flattered by my recognition of its peculiar merit, he wished to make me a gift of it.

The thing was incredibly successful from the very first.

The chair in which I seat my clients is placed directly at my elbow on the right, in front of the arm slide on my rolltop desk. I placed the picture inside the desk, opposite this chair, so that it was invariably the first thing that caught the eye of the visitor after being seated.

The effect was always interesting and profitable; in some instances even startling.

A study of the different sensations and expressions it has caused to appear on the faces of my unsuspecting clients would fill a volume. Frank or affected modesty, involuntary horror, open curiosity, sudden fear—it has shown them all. I became an adept at reading the signs—the temperature of this human thermometer.

By its very crudity, its primality, the thing was infallible, never failing to shock the mind into a betrayal of its most carefully hidden secrets. Of course, its main strength lay in its unexpectedness. I believed then, and I believe now, that no will, however strong, could have held itself neutral against the test without being forewarned.

And yet—I often wonder—how could she possibly have known?

On the morning of her first call I was alone in the office, having sent James uptown on some errand, while it was too early for the stenographer to have arrived.

Thus it was that I myself greeted her in the outer room, and inquired the nature of her business.

„I came to see Mr. Moorfield,“ she said in a voice which, naturally gentle and refined, was rendered rough and harsh by a very evident anxiety and uneasiness. „I wish to see him concerning a personal matter. It is very important.“

You will have some idea of the manner of her appearance and bearing when I confess that they almost persuaded me—me, the coolest and least impressionable

lawyer at the New York bar—to forego what I had come to call the „picture test“, and interview her in the outer room. Would to Heaven I had!

As she stood by the door looking up into my face with a half-hopeful, half-fearful expression, her rich, cherry lips trembling with the emotion she could not conceal, her eyes glowing and moist, her figure swaying in mute appeal—well, the angels themselves have seen no more delightful picture.

I can see her so now when I close my eyes.

However, I managed to retain my professional sense as I ushered her into the inner office and placed for her the chair before the desk. She sank into it with a murmured „Thank you,“ and then, as I seated myself beside her, I saw her gaze light upon the picture.

As I have said, her conduct was very nearly perfection. When the first rush of conscious thought returned—after the inevitable shock produced by the picture—I could observe none of the signs which I had come to regard as unfavorable.

There was no tightening of the lips, no dilation of the nostrils, no widening of the eyelids. It is true that I missed the most important moment, as immediately after her glance of curiosity at myself, I had become suddenly aware of the fact that I was holding a lighted cigar in my hand, and turned aside to throw it in the cuspidor.

It fell instead on the floor, and I stooped to pick it up. Thus I missed three or four valuable seconds which, however trifling they may seem to the average mind, will be recognized as all-important by the student of crime and character.

„Now, madam,“ I said gravely, turning to her, „what can I do for you?“

She was regarding me with a look of appeal and helplessness that was well-nigh irresistible.

„I have come,“ she said in a low tone, „to ask your help. I am—I am in great trouble. As soon as I discovered—“

„First,“ I interrupted, „why do you come to me? It is usual in such cases for one to consult one’s own attorney.“

„I know,“ she said hurriedly, „but I have no one. Besides, Mr. Moorfield surely knows his own reputation too well to be surprised at such a visit as mine.“

For the first time in my life I found a compliment a thing not to be despised. I smiled in spite of myself. When I looked up she, too, was smiling bravely through her tears.

The story she told me I shall attempt to reproduce in her own words:

„My name,“ she began, „is Lillian Markton. I am living in New York with my uncle, William Markton, of Riverside Drive. There is nothing in particular to tell you about myself unless you care to ask questions. The whole thing is so—so absurd—“

She hesitated, regarding me nervously.

„Go on,“ I said encouragingly.

After a moment of silence she continued: „It happened only last night. Uncle Will came home late, looking worried and uneasy, but I thought little of it, for he has had many business troubles, and it was really nothing unusual. You know, he is cashier of the Montague Bank. Well, when I got up this morning he was nowhere to be found.

„We usually ride in the park at seven o'clock, and after I had waited half an hour for him I went up to his room. The bed had not been disturbed. At nine o'clock I went to the bank and found"—her voice sank till it was scarcely audible—"that he had been arrested—charged with stealing fifty thousand dollars from the vaults."

„Was he arrested at home?" I interrupted.

„No—at the station. He was boarding a train for Chicago."

„Did he have the money with him?"

„Of course not!" Miss Markton exclaimed indignantly. „Do you think I would be here if he had?"

„My dear madam," I observed, „I was merely seeking information. But, after all, it is useless to question you. I must see Mr. Markton."

My visitor eyed me for a moment in silence.

„That, too, is useless," she said finally. „Mr. Markton has confessed."

I admit I was taken aback.

„Confessed!" I cried. „Confessed what?"

„To the theft."

„Then what the deuce do you want me for?" I demanded.

Miss Markton rose and stood facing me.

„Mr. Moorfield," she said, „I came to you because I have heard you mentioned as a man who, in addition to ability, possesses both sympathy and discernment. If my informant was mistaken—"

„But he was not," I hastened to assure her. „Pray forgive me and proceed."

With a nod of thanks and approval, and after a slight hesitation, she continued:

„My uncle's confession was peculiar," she said. „He admitted taking the money, but declares that he does not know where it is. It seems that the bank officials have been watching him for some time. He says that he brought the money home last night and locked it in the safe in the dining room; that when he went to get it early this morning it was gone, and that he was leaving New York with only a few dollars of his own.

„The money has not been found. There was no one else in the house but the servants and myself—Uncle Will is a bachelor—and none of the servants could possibly have opened the safe, to which I carried a key. That is why I have come to you. I am suspected of having—stolen—"

She suddenly gave way to sobbing, her head falling forward on the desk.

And I, overcome by a choking sensation that was entirely new to me, and wholly uncomfortable, sat regarding her hungrily, longing to take her in my arms and comfort her. I did not understand it then, and I do not now.

As soon as Miss Markton regained her composure she continued, speaking hurriedly and in a low tone:

„As far as Uncle Will is concerned, he must know I am innocent. They will not let me see him. It is the bank—I suppose they believe me to be an accomplice. They—I saw—" she hesitated, her eyes full of fear and appeal. „A man followed me here to your office. What am I to do?" she cried. „I am all alone! There is no one!"

Many times before had I heard such appeals—but they had left me unmoved and cold. Now it seemed that every fiber of my being trembled in response to this woman's cry.

My blood leaped and sang—I could see nothing but her tears, hear nothing but her voice. As well as I could I restrained myself; I took her hand, lying before me on the desk, and patted it gently. Words refused to come; but with that gesture I committed myself, and she felt it.

For upward of a quarter of an hour I questioned her, but without gaining any further information. Evidently she had told me all she knew. With my businesslike assumption of responsibility she gradually grew more calm, even cheerful; and as she rose to go she glanced at the picture before her and then looked up at me curiously.

„Someday,“ she said, „you must tell me the story of that picture. It is—I can’t describe how it makes me feel.“

She shrugged her shoulders prettily.

„I am sure it must have a history?“

„None whatever,“ said I, smiling. „It serves merely to hide the dust.“

„Then we must give it one. Ugh! It looks as though it might hide much more than dust.“

I bade her good-by at the door, assuring her that everything would turn out all right, and advising her to pay no attention whatever to the man who was following her. At parting she took my hand in hers and pressed it gently. When I returned to the office I could still feel the thrill of that contact through every inch of my body.

Once alone I attempted an analysis of the facts she had given me; but I found it impossible. Her voice, her face, her figure, filled my thoughts to the exclusion of all else.

My dry fight had deserted me, and I found myself swimming, or struggling rather, in a sea of sentiment and emotion. Finally, angry and impatient at my inability to formulate my thoughts, I started for the Tombs to see William Markton.

Markton received me sullenly enough, but when I told him I represented his niece, his face suddenly blazed with an almost maniacal fury. I recoiled involuntarily from his wild expression of rage and hate, while he burst forth into cursing and swearing, declaring that it was the fault of his niece that he had been caught—that she had taken the money, and that she would „pay for it in hell.“

In vain I expostulated and argued with him—it was all to no purpose. The man seemed absolutely convinced that Lillian Markton had taken the fifty thousand dollars which he himself had stolen from the bank; but when I pressed him for proof or evidence he had nothing to say.

Finally, however, I got an explanation of what I had considered the chief difficulties in Miss Markton’s case, though her uncle had no idea that he was thus aiding one whom he considered his worst enemy.

He explained that when he had first discovered that the money was missing from his safe he had had no suspicion of Lillian. Instead, he had suspected a friend and accomplice, who he knew had had many opportunities of obtaining duplicates of his keys—and he had gone to the railway station, not to make his escape, but to watch for his confederate. But when pressed for the man’s name he refused to give it, saying merely that he now knew he had suspected him unjustly—and launching forth again into curses and oaths against his niece.

I found it impossible to get anything further from him, even any reason for his own confession; and he sullenly refused my offer of legal aid, declaring that he

would have nothing to do with anyone connected with his niece. I admit I was relieved at his refusal of my offer, which I had made solely for the sake of Miss Markton.

I emerged from the Tombs with a confident belief in Lillian Markton's innocence. In Markton's story of the suspected confederate I placed no credence whatever—the thing seemed to me to bear all the marks of a hasty fabrication. Also, in the same breath with which he had accused his niece, Markton admitted that he had not even awakened her when he found the package of money missing.

His accusation of and bitterness toward her made it impossible to consider Miss Markton as an accomplice—for if she were holding the money in collusion with him it would be to his own interest to have her movements free. There was only one possible explanation: that Markton himself had removed and secreted the money.

From the Tombs I went directly to the Montague Bank—but the president was not in, and since the theft had not been made public I hesitated to confer with any other of the officials. Accordingly I returned to my office, leaving word that I would call again the following morning. I wanted, if possible, to get a trace of the money before seeing the president, knowing that to be the easiest way to clear Miss Markton of the breath of suspicion.

That evening I called on Miss Markton at her home.

To all outward appearance it was merely the counterpart of any other New York apartment of the better class; but her presence invested it with a distinct charm and attractiveness.

As I explained to her, I really had no excuse for calling; I had done nothing conclusive, having been unable to get the slightest trace of the missing money; and the only real news I had—that of her uncle's hostility toward her—was both unwelcome and unimportant. I ended by asking her if she could guess at any possible reason for Markton's confession.

„That,“ she said, after a moment's hesitation, „is easily explained. Uncle Will is the most lovable man in the world, but he has always been weak and somewhat of a coward. It was simply what you would call lack of nerve. That is why I find it almost impossible to believe you are right in supposing he has the money, or knows where it is.

„Of course they have tried every means to force him to tell, and I don't see how he could hold out against them, if he knew. And yet,“ she continued after a moment's thought, „where can it be? Perhaps you are right, after all; at any rate, I hope you find it.“

„And I, too,“ I said earnestly. „You know, Miss Markton, I am interested in this case as I have never been in any other. It is not only that I wish to prove you innocent; your name must not even be mentioned—that is, publicly. It is to that end that I am working—I trust, successfully. It is the greatest pleasure of my life to be allowed to help you.“

Miss Markton rose suddenly and walked to the window. When she turned back again her eyes were moist with tears and the hand she held toward me trembled as I grasped it in my own.

„Really, Mr. Moorfield,“ she smiled falteringly, „I am very silly. You must forgive me; but I have never had a great deal of friendship, and yours is very sweet to me.

And just to prove it," she added with a brave attempt at gaiety, "I am going to be very kind and send you home to bed!"

She finished with an adorable little smile that haunted me long after I reached my own chambers, which, for the first time in my life, seemed lonely and bare and cheerless.

How little, after all, do we shape our actions by reason, when once the senses feel their strength! The lightest perfume of a woman's hair is sufficient to benumb the strongest brain; the slightest glance from her eyes is blinding, fatal. And how hideously ugly does the truth appear when our senses have forced us to nurse a lie!

It would have been strange indeed if I had not succeeded in ridding Lillian Markton of the suspicion that had fallen upon her. I had set my heart on it; I felt in my heart that she was innocent; and I expended all my faculties and energy in her assistance.

I soon gave up all hope of finding any trace of the missing money. Markton remained firm in his statement that he had placed it in the safe, and that when he went for it he found it gone. A careful search of the apartment revealed nothing. I attempted to communicate with the confederate whom Markton had mentioned in his confession, but found that the police had exhausted all inquiries in that direction, and without success.

The money seemed absolutely to have disappeared from the face of the earth. I learned that the police had spread their net in all directions; that every possible clue had been unearthed and developed—in vain.

At last, in despair, I made a long-deferred call on the president of the Montague Bank.

"I have been expecting to see you," said the bank official as I entered his office, "since you left your card on Tuesday. Pray be seated!"

I came to the point at once without preliminary.

"I have come," I said, "as the representative of Miss Lillian Markton. For the past week her every move has been spied upon—wherever she has gone she has been followed, presumably by detectives in your employ. Further, she has every reason to fear that she will be publicly accused of complicity in the theft to which her uncle has confessed. As a result she is almost in a state of nervous collapse. The thing is monstrously unjust, sir, and you must know it."

As I spoke the bank president was walking up and down the floor. When I stopped he turned and regarded me uncertainly.

"Mr. Moorfield," he said, "I thoroughly appreciate your feelings and those of your client. But what are we to do? We owe it both to ourselves and to others to exhaust every possible effort to recover the stolen money, and certain facts point strongly to the possibility of your client's complicity.

"As far as Miss Markton personally is concerned, I have a high regard for her; she has been a friend of my daughter; and to tell the truth, she would have escaped all annoyance if it had not been for the importunities of my fellow directors. But until the money is found—"

"Which will possibly be never," I interrupted. "Or, at least, not before William Markton has served out his sentence. I fully believe he knows where the money is, and no one else."

„Perhaps so. But can you blame us for trying every possible means for its recovery?“

„No,“ I said, „that is your right. But surely you have no desire“—my voice was raised almost to appeal—„to persecute the innocent? And you must know—since you know her—you must feel that Miss Markton is not guilty.“

For a minute there was silence, while the bank official gazed through the window, lost in thought. Then he turned to me with a gesture of decision.

„Mr. Moorfield,“ he said, „I’ll tell you what I’ll do. The proceeding is a little irregular, but that is our own affair. I know—who does not—that you are one of the most conscientious men at the New York bar. I know what your word is worth.

„I know that you would never have taken Miss Markton’s case if you had not been absolutely assured of her innocence. You know her story, of course.“

“Of course,“ I agreed.

„Well,“ he spoke slowly and distinctly, „if you will stake your reputation on Miss Markton’s innocence; if you will give me your word that the evidence you have has persuaded you of it, she will be absolutely freed from any further annoyance and from the slightest suspicion.“

„But—“ I began.

„I know,“ he interrupted, „that you will be assuming a certain responsibility. But so will I. The point is—that we are both desirous that this girl should be freed from anxiety and trouble. I am merely asking you to do your part.“

I hesitated, but only for a moment.

There rose before me the vision of Lillian Markton as I had seen her the evening before, happy and grateful at my assurance of success—her eyes, tender and appealing and trustful, lifted to mine—to me a most perfect picture of innocence and purity. What harm could there possibly be in staking my reputation, even my honor, on what every throb of my heart, every pulsation of my brain proclaimed as an undeniable fact?

Still, as I walked out of the bank and down the street a few minutes later with the words of my pledge to the president ringing in my ears, I felt a vague uneasiness that would not be reasoned away. I had placed myself in a most peculiar position—I could only trust to the future to justify it.

As for my motives, they were indefinable. I merely felt that I had been pushed on by some irresistible power that had left me helpless and weak before it; and I was weighed down by a sickening sense of impending disaster.

That evening, as Lillian Markton pressed my hand with tender gratitude, I felt my fears disappear as though by magic. With her at my side, cheerful and lighthearted at the news I had imparted to her, my doubts and misgivings of the morning seemed absurd.

At noon of that day, she told me, the espionage of her movements had ceased; and, she added, „I really didn’t know how horrible it had been until it was over! Oh! how good it is to feel that there is someone who—who—“

„Well?“ I said hopefully. „Who what?“

„Who is a friend,“ she said, laughing at my eagerness. „Only you aren’t much of one or you wouldn’t be running off to a business engagement just when I want to talk to you. But there! You know how grateful I am!“

I walked on air and rode on the wings of the angels as I went downtown that night.

The following evening—for the first time—I dined with her at her home. During the day I had made an important decision—to me. I had decided to ask Miss Markton to be my wife. I could no longer conceal from myself the fact that I loved her—indeed, I no longer had any desire to conceal it.

It may be asked why I hesitated at all. I put that question to myself impatiently—and I could find no answer.

No answer—that is, in reason. But always there was in my heart that strange foreboding of evil—something inexplicable that tried to restrain me in spite of myself. I ignored it.

A dozen times that evening I tried to declare my love—to ask Lillian Markton to marry me—but the words somehow refused to come. In fact, I believe it takes a great coward to propose marriage—no man could possibly have the courage.

Miss Markton's mood may have had something to do with it. All her gaiety and cheerfulness of the evening before were gone; but when I attempted to rally her she declared that it was merely a reaction from the strain of the past week, and that all she needed was rest. At my earnest expression of sympathy she rose and crossed slowly to where I sat, resting her arm on the back of my chair.

When I looked up at her I was surprised to find that her eyes were wet with tears.

„Mr. Moorfield—“ she said, hesitating, her voice strangely tender. Then, after a long minute of silence, „But no—not tonight,“ she continued, as though to herself.

She let her hand fall to my shoulder, then hastily drew it away and returned to her own chair.

„If there is anything I can do,“ I began uncertainly.

„No,“ she said hurriedly, „there is nothing.“

For several minutes we sat in silence. When she spoke again it was to make what I then considered a rather strange request.

„I wish,“ she said, „to see that picture again—the one on your desk. I wonder—may I call on you tomorrow morning?“

„Certainly,“ I said; „but it seems—if you wish, I can bring the picture to you instead.“

„No,“ she answered; „if you don't mind I would prefer to see it—to come to your office. Of course, I know that what I am saying sounds queer, but tomorrow you will understand. You don't mind, do you?“ she smiled.

For another hour we sat, talking trivialities, and by the time I rose to go Miss Markton was almost cheerful. She accompanied me to the door and stood looking down at me as I descended the stairs, and as I paused at the bottom I heard a faint, tender „Good night.“

I have heard it many times since—in my dreams.

The next morning I arrived at the office early, after a bad night. I was in anything but a pleasant mood, and I am afraid I made things rather uncomfortable for one or two callers and for James and the stenographer, who seemed relieved when I dismissed them for the day, saying that I expected someone with whom I wished to be alone.

It was an hour later when the door opened to admit Miss Markton.

„You see,“ I smiled as I ushered her into the inner office, „I have cleared the way for you. Here is your chair. It was just ten days ago today that you first sat in it. Things have changed since then, haven't they?“

„Yes,“ said Miss Markton slowly, „things have changed. No,“ as I took a seat on the window ledge, „sit here—in your own chair. I want to talk to you—that way.“

I did as she requested, and drew my chair up in front of the desk, close to hers, while she sat regarding me intently, even wistfully.

Then, as she turned and looked at the picture in front of her, her eyes hardened, and when she spoke it was in a cold, lifeless voice that was new to me.

During what followed she did not look at me once, but gazed steadily at the picture.

„Do you know,“ she said, „what that picture has done to you—to us? I want you to promise me,“ she went on before I could speak, „that you will hear me through in silence. That whatever I do or say you will say nothing—till I have finished. Will you promise?“

„But surely—“ I began, bewildered.

„No. You must promise.“

It was my professional training, I suppose, that led me to nod my head gravely and listen calmly as she continued.

A lawyer grows accustomed to the unusual.

„I have seen that picture in my dreams,“ she went on. „It has haunted me night and day. I could see your surprise when I asked about it every time I saw you. I knew it was dangerous, but I couldn't help it. Somehow I enjoyed it—I suppose just as a child likes to play with fire. But before I go on—“

She stopped suddenly and, bending forward in her chair, thrust her hand behind the picture and drew forth a package wrapped in paper. Placing it on the desk at my elbow she broke the string and, tearing off the paper, placed the contents before me.

One glance was enough—involuntarily I uttered a cry of amazement.

It was the fifty thousand dollars stolen by William Markton from the Montague Bank!

Opening a large handbag she had carried with her, Miss Markton picked up the package of money and dropped it inside.

„There,“ she said, patting the bag, „is the money you have been searching for, Mr. Moorfield. I shall keep it. Heaven knows I have earned it!“

„You may wonder,“ she continued as, scarcely hearing or comprehending, I sat with staring eyes set straight before me, „why I did not remove the money without your knowledge. It was because I felt that I owed you an explanation.

„I took the money from Uncle Will's safe ten minutes after he had put it there. At first it was my intention to return it, but after I opened it and saw—well, I am not making excuses. When I found that Uncle Will had been arrested, I saw plainly that I, too, was in danger.

„They were absolutely certain to search the apartment, so I went home to get the money, and started downtown with it, having no idea of where to go. Then I saw that I was being followed, and, thoroughly frightened, came to your office merely by chance, although I had heard something of you. Almost the first thing I saw was the picture and, hardly knowing what I did, I thrust the money behind it when

you stooped to throw away your cigar. It was only afterward, when your manner told me that it had not been discovered, that I realized what an excellent hiding place I had chosen.

„You know the rest. You know why I feel myself safe in telling you. And yet you do not know all. There is one thing that such a woman as I am has no right to say to such a man as you. If I had the right“—the hard voice faltered ever so little—„I would say it. Heaven knows it is true. No—let me finish!

„I have fooled you and cheated you enough. I am speaking now simply that you may know me for the thing I am. If I could only—“

Here her voice broke, harsh with pain. As I sat with my head bowed between my hands I felt a breath, the merest touch, on my cheek. A moment later the door closed. She was gone.

I have never found her except in my dreams.

Perhaps it is just as well.

I seem somehow to get along better with my memories than most men do with their wives; and the passing years have given me philosophy.

As for the picture—I returned it to my friend who painted it, and who later sold it for quite a handsome sum.

Sometimes even memories are sharp-tongued.

