

# **The Dead are Quick...**

**but sometimes the living are still quicker!**

**by Emil Petaja, 1915-2000**

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>Chapter 1 ...</b>	<b>Someone from the Audience.</b>
<b>Chapter 2 ...</b>	<b>Something Unright about this Girl.</b>
<b>Chapter 3 ...</b>	<b>The Waitful Hearse.</b>
<b>Chapter 4 ...</b>	<b>Stork ... Stoack.</b>
<b>Chapter 5 ...</b>	<b>The Mortuary.</b>
<b>Chapter 6 ...</b>	<b>Faker.</b>
<b>Chapter 7 ...</b>	<b>The Funeral at Greenwood Cemetery.</b>



## Chapter 1

### Someone from the Audience.

„Now if I might obtain the assistance of someone from the audience—a young lady, perhaps?“

Hamlet's grey-green eyes swept over the jeweled and tuxedoed Hollywood audience. He smiled a light roguish smile. The audience rippled. It was well known that Hamlet the Great, tall dark and hypnotic master of legerdemain arts, was not only magnificent where trickery and amusingly ribald patter was concerned, but was magnificent with the ladies as well.

So when a young girl in a shabby brown coat rose from her seat and, under the spell of the magician's questing eyes, moved timidly—fearfully—down the aisle toward the ramp leading to the stage, they all tittered and settled down for something especially amusing. This was all part of the act. Naturally!

Hamlet took the timid girl's hand and assisted her to an immense throne-like chair in the center of the stage.

„Now, my dear,“ he smiled winningly, „if you don't mind—the hat and coat.“

The shy girl shot a terrified look at the audience. Then she slipped off her shabby coat and hat with hands that quivered.

„No need to be frightened, child,“ Hamlet assured her gently, surprised himself at what removal of her obnoxious hat and coat revealed.

She wore a simple peasant frock, quite unsuitable for evening wear. And this reaffirmed the audience in its judgment that this was all part of the act. But if her clothing was ordinary her beauty was not. Large lustrous blue eyes shone out of a cameo-like face. Her dark hair was like a raven's wing, providing a halo-like line for her graceful, pale neck and throat. Her bosom heaved with excitement.

„B-but—“

Hamlet smiled encouragingly.

„Sit down, child. Tell us your name.“

She slid into the chair, clutching its arms. The terror showed itself again as she stared into that ocean of watching eyes.

„I—I'm sorry. My name is Julia. Julia Courtney.“

Hamlet bowed low.

„Thank you, Julia. Now, what I propose to do is to conduct an experiment in simple hypnotism. I wish to perform a feat I first learned when I was in India. Did you know that I studied Yogi in India for three years, Julia?“

She shook her head. The audience laughed. This was typical Hamlet routine.

Hamlet nodded gravely. „But first I must obtain your unqualified approval. Are you entirely willing, may I probe into the secrets of your mind, Julia—or shall I find another assistant?“

Julia hesitated. She half rose, then sank back in the great chair. Wearing that loose filmy blouse and tight-waisted peasant skirt, she looked like a child. She seemed to search Hamlet’s face intently, then she nodded.

„Go ahead. I’m ready.“

## Chapter 2

### Something Unright about this Girl.

Hamlet slipped a ring on his middle finger, a ring with a large blood-red stone in it, that seemed to be a living flame. Julia couldn’t help staring at it. Hamlet nodded his approval and began to make rhythmic movements with his expressive hands, quite unnecessarily, but the audience liked that sort of thing. They enjoyed the sensation of watching him put this slip of a girl under his spell; it appealed to some covert sadism in them.

„You are becoming very tired,“ Hamlet told her. „Very, very tired. You want to sleep. Sleep. Sleep...“

Her eyelids fluttered unwillingly while she stared at that chunk of bloody flame that floated before her eyes. Then she sighed, and fell back.

„Do you hear me, Julia?“ Hamlet asked, after a moment.

„Y-Yes.“

„Will you answer my questions?“

„Yea.“

„Fine. Tell us how old you are, child.“

„Eighteen.“

„What is your position in life? What do you do?“

„I—I am a receptionist in a—a mortuary on Washington Boulevard.“

She shuddered involuntarily. Hamlet’s forehead corrugated. There was something unright about this girl, a mystery that hovered over her head like an unholy halo. He’d sensed it the moment she stepped on the stage. That livid fear in her eyes was more than stage fright.

He asked softly, „Why did you come into the theatre? You are not dressed for the theatre.“

Julia’s face twisted, became luminous with the urgency of her fear.

„Today was my day off. I—I was going home from just window shopping on the Boulevard. Then I knew I was being followed. I could see him—a big, ugly man. I got panicky. Then I saw this place, and bought a ticket. I thought I could escape him in the darkness. Then—I saw him come in. He took a seat right behind me. He kept staring at me. I—I didn’t know what to do, then—when you called for an assistant, I came up here. I thought you might help me. He means to kill me. You must help me!“

„Of course I will, Julia,“ Hamlet said calmly. „Now tell me, very carefully—who is this ugly man who you think is following you? And why—“

Julia was rising stiffly to her feet. She stared straight ahead of her, „He—he has a knife!“ she whispered dryly. Then she slipped quietly to the floor in a dead faint.

## Chapter 3

### The Waitful Hearse.

It is HIGHLY likely that no other man of the theatre could have hypnotized this packed house into believing everything was going per plan. No one but Hamlet the Great. First thing they knew the girl was gone and they were laughing at something droll Hamlet was saying. While the scene was being shifted and gay music covered the momentary confusion, Hamlet whispered to the husky young assistant with the flaming red hair who had whisked Julia offstage, „Take her to my dressing room and stay with her every second. Oh yes, Tippy. You’d better call Lieutenant Reeves at Headquarters.“

Young Tippy gave him a wry look that asked indignantly how he could stay with the girl and also be calling headquarters, but, with a sweep of his black cloak, Hamlet had moved back on stage.

For the balance of the show, although his hands were as uncannily adroit as ever in covering the trickery behind each illusion, and his patter was as polished and brilliant as ever, Hamlet’s mind was busy wondering what lay behind the terror in Julia Courtney’s eyes—and who the man with the knife could be.

Avoiding supernumerary bows he whipped backstage toward his dressing room to find out. He met Tippy coming around a corner from the opposite direction.

„Why aren’t you guarding her?“ he demanded.

„I had to phone Reeves, didn’t I, boss?“ Tippy sulked. „Then I took a peek out front to see if I could locate the creep with the shiv. Uh-uh.“

„And the girl?“

„Asleep on the couch. Say, boss, she sure is—“

„Never mind. Did she awaken at all?“

„Uh-uh. But she kept talking in her sleep. All she kept saying was one word. Sounded like *stork*. What d’you suppose she meant, boss?“ Tippy’s face dropped. „You don’t think she’s going to have a—“

„No, Tippy,“ Hamlet reassured his romance-minded assistant as he pushed into his dressing room.

His face went to stone as he stared down at an empty couch. Behind him Tippy gave a yelp and made for the clothes closet to find the girl. But Hamlet saw the wide-open window at once. He was through it in no time, sprinting down the dark cobbled alley like a great bat. Ahead of him a bulky shadow was lumbering toward a long black hearse parked near the alley-mouth. The shadow packed a girl on its shoulder so it couldn’t move very fast.

Hamlet reached them a few yards from the waitful hearse. He spun the big man around, applying his fist to the center of a round bristling face. The man grunted and dropped his burden. He started swinging.

The darkness didn't confirm the man's ugliness, but he certainly was big. But Hamlet was no mean pugilist, and his proficiency at the gentle art of judo was the talk of Hollywood. The big man's haymakers could have flattened a middle-size elephant, but where they lauded Hamlet just wasn't. Inside three minutes the big man was flat on his back in the alley muck. Hamlet was about to pick up the unconscious girl when a gun flamed from the interior of the black chariot of death.

That was as much as Hamlet decided just before he decided to fall forward on the cobbles and leave this vale of tears to its own devices.

## Chapter 4

### Stork ... Stoack.

„Boss! Wake up—please wake up!“

Tippy's snubby face was tearful with his contrition and inward fear.

„You gotta be all right!“ he said stubbornly.

„Well, if you say so, Tippy.“

Hamlet smiled wanly as he sat up and looked about him. He was on his dressing room couch and his flamingheaded assistant was hanging over him like a mother hen with a sick chick. Hamlet stood up and reassured himself that the door of the dressing room was locked against intrusion, reached a cigarette out of Tippy's convenient pocket and lit it. Tippy gaped.

„Why, you ain't hurt!“ he cried.

„Hardly even dead.“

„Then what's the idea of scaring me—“

„Tippy,“ Hamlet inquired gravely, „in what commodity does your boss deal?“

Tippy cogitated hard. „Tricks and illusions,“ he exclaimed brightly.

Hamlet nodded. „Exactly. And just at this moment I wish to create the illusion that I am dead.“

„Why?“ Tippy demanded bluntly. Hamlet inhaled thoughtfully. „Because the mystery of Julia Courtney intrigues me. It offers relief from the boredom that infests my humdrum existence.“

Ignoring the broad grin that swept over Tippy's face he went on. „Besides, she is in deadly danger at this moment. Wants rescuing in the very worst way.“

„What way is that, boss?“ Tippy asked flippantly.

„My way.“

„Then you believe all that stuff she said?“

„Implicitly. And here is what I intent to do about it. By a trick of suspended animation I learned while I was in India—I really was, you know—I propose to simulate death. You will have my body sent to a mortuary at once...“

Tippy displayed one of his rare flashes of brilliance. „To the mortuary she worked at!“

„Tippy, you really are amazing. Will you let me be your assistant?“

Tippy blushed scarlet. „Aw shucks. Boss—“

„That mortuary on Washington Boulevard,“ Hamlet said briskly, „is undoubtedly the seat of Julia's trouble, and the hearse indicates it beyond any

logical doubt. Now a living man caught snooping around there is liable to become a dead one before he has done much rescuing. Whereas a dead man—“

„Nobody’s going to worry about another stiff in a joint that’s full of them!“ Tippy chuckled. Then he grimaced unhappily. „But, Boss—we don’t know which mortuary it is! There must be thirty or forty of ‘em on Washington Boulevard. Why, there’s more dead people over there than live ones!“

Hamlet crushed his smoke thoughtfully.

„There is much merit in what you say. Tippy. But—wait! We have one clew! That word she kept repeating in her sleep—what was it?“

„Stork. But—“

„Stork. Um. Reach me the yellow telephone book like a good boy.“

Tippy hiked over to the reference shelf Hamlet kept handy and took down the ponderous Los Angeles Classified directory. He handed it to his boss, his face gloomy and unhopeful. Hamlet took no notice. He whirred cheerfully to the section on Funeral Homes.

„Stark, Seeley, Simms,“ he recited. „Siverman, Stevens, Stoack ... Stoack!“

He looked at Tippy.

Tippy blinked uncertainly a moment, then nodded furiously.

„Sure, Boss! That’s it, that’s it!“

„Goody, goody. Stoack Mortuary it is.“

There came a loud, official-sounding knock on the door.

„That must be Lieutenant Reeves. Took him long enough to get fifteen blocks. Well, might as well let him in. He’ll have to be in on my—er—demise.“

Tippy didn’t look happy about what his boss proposed to do.

„Is it really necessary, Boss?“ he grumbled.

„Yes, Tippy.“

Tippy sniffed and rubbed his nose indignantly as he headed for the door, which was being hanged on by this time.

„Okay, Boss. It’s—it’s your funeral.“

## Chapter 5

### The Mortuary.

Hamlet the great lay stiff and immobile on his slab in the mortuary, he could see nothing but the darkness inside his eyelids. He would rely on his acute auditory and olfactory senses. The latter presented him nothing pleasant—the antiseptic odor of the white sheet that covered him; while his ears told him there was someone with him in the long room. Clumping feet shuffled back and forth while the man in the room strained and grunted over the weight of heavy boxes or coffins. He was humming, *Be Glad When You’re Dead, You Rascal You*.

Hamlet’s plan had moved, so far at least, with ridiculous smoothness. Not a hitch anywhere. Here he was, in the back room of Stoack’s Mortuary, ostensibly awaiting the ministrations of the undertaker’s needles and knives. Stoack was away somewhere, and an assistant named Hollis was in charge.

Tippy and Lieutenant Reeves had both fought against his idea, but Hamlet insisted. A fake death certificate was provided, and by use of an Indian drug

and self-hypnosis he had brought about his present alarming condition—giving the appearance of a handsome, well-dressed cadaver.

Inside two hours the effect of the drug that made his flesh assume a cold, dead appearance would wear off. Then he would be able to open his eyes first. Then move his lips and shift his hands and head and legs, little by little, until full normal functioning power was resumed. Until that time his danger was very great. What if that assistant decided to start working on him before the two hours was up...?

He had garnered meager information about Stoack and his mortuary from Lieutenant Reeves. The mortuary was small. As far as was known there were only four men connected with it—Stoack, Hollis, and two ambulance men. The pug-ugly he slugged in the alley was undoubtedly one of the latter. Stoack had operated his establishment only eight months or so, yet they seemed to do a rushing business in transferring bodies from one place to another. Funerals were far between. The police had nothing on him.

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Hamlet estimated while he was being carried down the room that it was perhaps thirty feet long, but narrow, and at the far end was a little cubicle like an office, possessing a squeaky desk chair. From the noise the shuffler was making there seemed to be a prodigious number of coffins and crates around—particularly for a funeral parlor that rarely conducted funerals.

Somebody came in and spoke to the shuffler. Hamlet strained to catch every word.

„Haven't you got that stuff put away in the lockup yet, Burke?“

Hamlet recognized Hollis, the assistant's shrill lisp.

„Only got two hands,“ Burks growled. „Let somebody else do a little of this night work.“

„Suppose you mean Graven. Jed drove down over the border with the boss to help with the new shipment. Stoack isn't going to love you any more if he walks in and finds out the last one is still up here in these coffins.“

Burke swore. „I copped that nosey dame, didn't I—before she could sing? And I put that magician on a slab where he won't get any ideas, didn't I?“

„With my help,“ Hollis lisped.

Burke swore again. „How about helping me tuck these hot goods to bed, eh?“

„No. I have to get back to Angela. She mustn't escape again.“

„You gonna slip her the business, Hollis?“

„Of course not. I told the boss what was up when he phoned from Cicci's, and he told me to hold off until he gets back. He's got something special on his mind.“

„When's he getting back?“ Burke complained. „I need Graven to help me with this junk?“

„They'll be here any minute. Better get busy,“ Hollis warned, and left.

Burke went back to work. He seemed to be removing something from boxes and carrying it down a stairway and depositing it, piece by piece, in some secret hold. Things were moving fast. Hamlet knew the time for action was at hand — before Stoack and the other hood got back. He fought to move, to release his muscles from the invisible restraint of that drug. For a second he thought he was making it. His eyelid flickered. Then he heard a door slam in front. He relaxed, went dead again.

## Chapter 6

### Faker.

Multiple feet tramped in. He heard a new voice, a crisp dominating voice. This must be Jorg Stoack.

Stoack said, „Where is he?“

„Here under this sheet,“ Hollis lisped complacently.

Hamlet felt it when the white sheet covering him was flicked off. He felt somebody bend over him and probe him with eyes and with hands.

„What killed him?“ Stoack snapped.

„Lead poisoning,“ Hollis tittered. „I shot him.“

„Did you examine the wound?“

„Superficially. The red-head stooge of his cleaned it up pretty well—him or the doctor who signed the death certificate.“

„What doctor?“

„Why—Dr. Brogas. Simon Brogas, it says on the certificate.“

„You idiot!“

„W-What'd you mean, boss?“ Hollis squeaked.

Stoack didn't bother to answer. He was unbuttoning Hamlet's shirt, ripping off the tape that hid an apparently fatal bullet-wound.

„Just as I thought! Hollis, you're a blundering fool!“ Stoack tore into his assistant in a very uncomplimentary manner.

„What's up?“ Burke edged in curiously. „Ain't he dead enough for you, boss?“

„He's not dead at all,“ Stoack rasped. „This is Hamlet the Great. I saw him pull a suspended animation act in London years ago that would have made Houdini look second rate. No. He's far from dead enough to suit me, Burke. But he will be. He will be...“

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Hamlet felt pain drive through him as the mortician's fist crashed down on his face. He felt the shock of it down to his heels and that told him the effect of the drug was wearing off fast.

„Open your eyes, you faker!“ Stoack snarled.

He started slapping Hamlet's face viciously with the back of his hand. Hamlet remained immobile. He let his head flop loosely from side to side under the lashing, fighting to keep under that curtain drug. Finally the agony was over, and Stoack panted, „He must have taken some drug to make him look so dead. It hasn't worn off yet. He'll keep. You come with me, Hollis.“

„Let me kill him,“ Hollis begged emotionally.

„No! I want him to be able to feel it.“

„What you gonna do, boas?“ Burke gloated.

„He came here as a corpse. I have a bonafide death certificate. What do you think I'll do? I'm going to treat him just as I would any corpse—only he is going to have full use of his senses, so that he can enjoy the experience to the fullest!“

He said something about an early funeral that made Hollis titter, as they walked away. Hamlet was beginning to think his ruse had worked when Stoack called back, „Oh, Burke.“



„Yeah, boss?“

„Never mind those coffins. Keep your gun on him. If he moves, get him.“

„He won't play none of his tricks on me,“ Burke vowed.

Half an hour went by with agonising slowness. It was as if time had turned to rubber and was stretching each second into an hour. As the drug wore off it became almost impossible for Hamlet to retain his corpse-like rigidity. His skin prickled and itched. He yearned to stretch his arms and legs, to so much as move one finger would have been heaven. But he didn't dare. He could hear Burke breathing, as he sat on a propped-up box at Hamlet's feet, watching him doggedly, gun in hand.

So vivid were Hamlet's hearing powers by now that he was aware of every movement that thug made. And when he was certain Burke had shifted his glance away, yawning, he let one eyelid raise a little. Yes. Now was his chance.

## Chapter 7

### The Funeral at Greenwood Cemetery.

When Burke looked back at him—he'd only closed his eyes a couple seconds—he blinked and rubbed them in surprise. He gaped down at the big ring that had blossomed on Hamlet's finger in that interim. Hamlet's hands were folded across his chest as before, but now his middle finger wore a ring with a flashing blood-red stone in it. Fascinated, Burke shifted his gun to his left hand, and started to take the ring off Hamlet's finger. By muscular control Hamlet kept it tight.

Burke growled and set down his gun.

Now Hamlet moved. Like forked lightning his arms went up, entwining lovingly around the thug's neck. But his embrace was anything but gentle as he vised that ugly head in the crook of his elbow and squeezed, while his left hand clapped over Burke's mouth to halt a surprised yelp.

„Be a good boy, bad boy,“ Hamlet told him crisply, „If you don't want to crowd up one of those fake coffins. Now—tell me where your boss went!“

„I—I dunno,“ Burke choked.

Tears sprang from his eyes when Hamlet applied pressure. He moaned, strangledly, „Funeral—Greenwood Cemetery.“

Then he collapsed.

It was useless to question him further. He was out for a long, long time. And time was precious. Hamlet took a moment to verify some suspicions that had been sprouting in his mind in regard to the coffins Burke had been working on, and the hidden cache under the trapdoor in the floor, then he found his coat and hat and cane—and started away.

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The mortuary was a dead place. Quite evidently Hollis and the thug called Graven were with Stoack at Greenwood. The sickly light of false dawn flickered morbidly through the high opaque windows as Hamlet hurried across the long room to the outside door. He shivered in the grip of an overwhelming sense of defeat at the thought that he had failed Julia Courtney...

Out on Washington Boulevard, he hailed a lonely cab that floated like an aimless derelict on that silent ocean of morning fog. He told the driver, „Greenwood Cemetery—hurry!“

The little man in front gulped, „Yessir,“ and sent the cab scuttling down the boulevard. He kept staring at his fare through the little mirror. Hamlet smiled wanly, realizing that the pallid make-up he had on to help the illusion of death, as well as his magician’s dress-suit and cloak, that he looked like Dracula in a hurry to get back to hit grave before dawn.

Greenwood was one of the smaller of the old cemeteries, located next to a golf course on the rolling Westwood hills. Through sentinel palms and fringed eucalyptus Hamlet glimpsed a sombre knot of people moving across the lawns toward an open grave. At the entrance to the cemetery was an empty hearse which bore, in polished chrome lettering, the words Stoack Mortuary.

As Hamlet stepped out and tossed the hackie a bill, he said, „Listen, find a telephone and call—never mind!“

His roving eye had sighted a dark blue sedan he recognized as Lieutenant Reeves’ unofficial police car. If Reeves was on hand, Tippy was not far away, either. He hurried through the wrought-iron gates and skirted the ancient gravestones across a wet green earth to which clung a shroud-like mist in the direction of that little funeral circle.

„Boss!“ It was Tippy who was running at him and pumping his hand, half-hysterical with relief.

„How did you get here?“ Hamlet demanded.

„We followed them!“ Tippy pointed at the funeral circle, from which came a murmurous minister’s voice and a low sobbing of a woman. „We thought—“

„I understand.“

## **Chapter 8**

### **A Good Samaritan.**

Tippy was leading him off to one side behind an immense oleander tree where Reeves and two of his plain-clothes associates were holding council. Reeves’ wide, homely face lighted up when he saw the magician.

„I see you’re alive again.“

„So it seems.“

Hamlet gestured quickly at the funeral group. „What’s all that?“

„Strictly on the level,“ Reeves told him grumpily. „We had a look in the coffin. Half expected to find you in it. That’s why we followed them out here. It’s just a little old lady. Her sister hadn’t any money, so when Stoack—good Samaritan that he is—offered to give her a simple funeral without charge she naturally—Hey! What’s the matter with you?“

Hamlet was grabbing his arm.

„They’ve started to lower the coffin! You’ve got to stop them!“

Reeves snorted, „I will not! I’ve already made a fool of—“

Hamlet wasn’t listening any longer. He was sprinting through the group and telling the four men in black to put down the coffin.

Stoack’s voice burst out, „This is outrageous!“

Hamlet whirled on him. He saw a stout man in a frock coat, with puffy black-rimmed eyes that reminded him of a cobra's. A long, emaciated creep with thin blonde hair and a twitchy chin who stood next to Stoack was, he decided, the assistant, Hollis.

Before anyone could move Hamlet had slipped the thin blade concealed in his cane out of its sheath and had pried the cheap coffin top open. There, on a satiny lining, lay the shrivelled body of an old woman. Hamlet turned to the black-veiled lady who was sobbing.

„I know you will forgive me when you understand why I am doing this.“

He lifted the frail body out gently and set it across his cloak. Then he knelt and ripped the satin lining out of the coffin. Reeves was beside him, protesting, by now.

„Look!“ Hamlet told him. „False bottom—like the ones in the mortuary!“ His sensitive fingers probed for and found a catch that opened the false bottom. Then he was reaching inside, lifting the slim body of Julia Courtney out of it.

„She's alive!“ he exclaimed. „Take care of her, somebody.“

Across the open grave Stoack had pulled a revolver out of his frock coat and was pointing it at him. Never had Hamlet seen such demoniac hate in a human being's eyes. He lifted to his feet as Stoack fired. The bullet skimmed his arm. Hamlet faced Stoack with sublime calm.

„Just the sadistic sort of thing you would think of—burying her alive—I ought to have known when I found out what you intended for me!“

Stoack's face was insane as he fired, again and again. Hamlet seemed to melt easily away from each deadly bullet. With a snarl Stoack leaped at his throat, leaped right on the cane-sword Hamlet held. He made a gurgling sound, then toppled back heavily into the grave he had planned so carefully for Julia Courtney.

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„So that was it,“ Reeves said, after they had assured themselves Julia Courtney was resting easily in the receiving hospital they brought her to. „Stoack was a smuggler.“

Hamlet nodded.

„Narcotics, mostly. He brought them over the border, and distributed them with his hearses. I found out that his coffins have false bottoms. He even used fiendishly-real wax dummies as a cover. A quick look would fool anybody, and most people aren't anxious to investigate hearses too closely.

That is where he had a peculiar advantage. Then, of course, he would have an occasional funeral, so as to make everything look kosher.“

„How about the girl?“

„She was part of the setting, too. Seeing her in his reception room would convince anyone. Only Julia must have stumbled across something that spelled danger for them. Stoack decided she must be gotten rid of—and figured out that clever scheme of burying her with the pauper lady. You telling me about Stoack's good Samaritan deed tipped me off. I was reasonably certain that Mr. Stoack wasn't giving away anything for free—anything except death.“

