

# **The Mother of Invention**

## **The Black Cat, #2**

**by Rex Stout, 1886-1975**

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WILLIAM FREDERICK MARSTON BLEW a cone of cigarette smoke thoughtfully into the air, sighed despairingly, and read the cablegram for the third time:

WALK HOME TIRED OF YOUR FOOLISHNESS NOT A CENT.

*Jonathan Marston.*

„I suppose,“ said William Frederick aloud, „he thinks he’s funny. And the first two words, which are entirely useless and perfectly offensive, cost him an extra half-dollar. The governor is getting extravagant.“

He tossed his cigarette into a porcelain urn on the table, lit another, and crossing the room, seated himself in a chair by the window and gazed thoughtfully out at the throng in the street below.

The hour was half past three in the afternoon; the street, the Rue Royale, Paris. Trim speedy taxicabs, with their air of fussy importance, glided along the farther curb; here and there an old-fashioned cabriolet or hansom dodged helplessly about in the rush of the modern traffic. The pedestrians sauntered, strolled, trotted, paraded—did everything, in short, except walk. The chauffeurs and cab drivers courteously exchanged scurrilous epithets, the *sergent de ville* at the corner blew his whistle furiously, waving his arms wildly in all directions, and barefooted gamins darted through the crowd, crying late evening editions of the newspapers. Over all was the soft radiance of the September sun.

But the humor and color of this animated scene was entirely lost upon William Frederick Marston. Perched high in the air on the horns of a dire dilemma, he was madly struggling in a desperate effort to regain a footing on solid earth.

For perhaps half an hour he remained sitting by the window, smoking many cigarettes and trying to think. But his situation was so fantastically horrible, so utterly unprecedented, that he found it impossible to shape his thoughts. There was no ground on which to build. The hypothesis being absurd, how could he be expected to arrive at a logical conclusion?

Suddenly he rose to his feet, thrust his hand into his vest pocket and drew forth three franc-pieces and one or two sous. For a moment he gazed at them mournfully, then returned them to his pocket, crossed to a wardrobe, took from it his hat and gloves, and left the room.

In fifteen minutes he returned, looking, if possible, more dejected than before. He entered the room with a slow, irresolute step, closing the door behind him with exaggerated care. Depositing his hat and gloves on the table, he crossed the room and stood by the window. Again he thrust his hand into his vest pocket, and drew it forth. It contained three sous. Opening the window, he tossed them into the street below and smiled with tragic amusement as he saw three or four gamins dart toward them. Then, with a deep sounding sigh, he sank back in a chair by the window, muttering, „I—Billy Marston—to lose *three francs* at roulette! It is horrible.“

It was, indeed; too, it was incredible. But alas! It was true. And now the three francs were gone, and William Frederick Marston began to think in earnest.

How it had come about he could scarcely have told. His recollection of the events of the three months previous was somewhat dimmed by their whirlwind rapidity and unusual and varied character. He had a faint memory of an affair of the heart à la Byron at Milan, a disgraceful though amusing experience among the beachcombers at Marseilles, and a disastrous hour of recklessness at Monte Carlo. He had mentioned none of these incidents in his letters to his father, Jonathan Marston, of New York, who had seen fit to send his son, William Frederick, on an educational tour of the Mediterranean during the summer vacation preceding his senior year at Harvard.

The tour of the Mediterranean had been abruptly halted by the misfortune at Monte Carlo. William Frederick had cabled to New York for additional funds and on receiving them he had departed for Paris. Struck by the beauty of that city, he

had immediately decided to buy it, and discovered too late that he had squandered his last sou on a worthless option. The fall term at Harvard was to begin in two weeks. He cabled his father:

LEAVE FOR NEW YORK TOMORROW WIRE FUNDS.

*William.*

That cablegram promptly brought the following answer:

FIVE HUNDRED MORE YOU NEED A GUARDIAN.

*Father.*

But by that time the lure of the City by the Seine had William Frederick in its deadly grasp. Three days later he sent another cablegram:

FUNDS DISAPPEARED WIRE QUICK SAIL TOMORROW.

*William.*

In a few hours came the following answer:

PASSAGE ON ALVONIA SAILING CHERBOURG TENTH PAID HERE AM  
SENDING TWENTY DOLLARS FOR FARE TO CHERBOURG.

*Father.*

William Frederick, commenting indignantly on the folly and immorality of suspicious parents, obtained the twenty dollars and purchased a ticket for Cherbourg, whither he decided to betake himself the following morning. The ticket, however, was but thirty francs. That evening he entered a certain gay and noisy apartment in the Montparnasse Quarter with fifty francs in his pocket, and came out with two thousand. On the following day, at the hour the ALVONIA sailed from Cherbourg, he was walking in the Champs Elysées, ogling aristocratic carriages and trying to decide whether to spend the evening on the Mountain or at the Folies Bergère.

Three days later he sent the following cablegram, collect:

MISSED STEAMER WIRE FUNDS OR ARRANGE TRANSPORTATION.

*William.*

And it was in answer to this that he had received the unfeeling and sarcastic advice from his father to walk home. And William Frederick, being a wise son and therefore knowing his own father, was very well aware of the fact that what Jonathan Marston said, he meant.

He was, in fact, tired of Paris. He wanted to go home.

The governor must know that. And the fall term at the university would commence in three days. He felt a sudden fierce yearning for knowledge. Was his father so unfeeling as to deny him the advantages of a decent education? Did he

not realize the imperative necessity for one's attendance at one's preliminary lectures and recitations? Surely he must. Another cablegram would persuade him.

But no. Pride had something to say about that. Since his father had seen fit to refuse his reasonable request for money to come home, he would make no further appeal to *him*. Such an appeal, he told himself bitterly, would be useless anyway. Some other expedient must be found.

He had friends, of course—dozens of them. There were one or two whom he could trust utterly—Sackville Du Mont, for instance, or Tom Driscoll, of Philadelphia. But they, poor devils, could be of no use in a financial difficulty. And the others would talk. That would serve his father right—to have it known all over New York that the son of Jonathan Marston had been forced to depend on the assistance of friends to get home when an unforeseen shortage of funds had overtaken him during his travels in Europe. If his father showed no concern for the dignity of the Marston name, why should he?

But here, again, entered pride. And the pride of youth, when properly nourished and aroused, is capable of magnificent sacrifices and supreme idiocies. It caused William Frederick to reject with scorn the idea of an appeal for money to his acquaintances; it caused him to regard the conduct of his father with increasing indignation and resentment; it caused him, finally, to resolve grandly that he would make his way home unaided and alone. Sublime resolution!

He proceeded immediately to the consideration of ways and means. The obvious and ordinary method he dismissed with contempt. It was all very well for common persons to peel potatoes or feed cattle for a passage across the Atlantic—indeed, Tom Driscoll had done it, and he thought none the less of him for it—but such a degradation could not even be thought of in the case of William Frederick Marston. It was a sheer impossibility. In fact, he regarded as absolutely necessary the luxuries and privileges of the first cabin. This greatly increased the difficulty of an otherwise simple task. He must use his wits.

He used them. A thousand schemes offered themselves to his mind, each to be rejected in its turn. As for earning the money for a passage, that was impossible. He had no ability that was marketable, even in that greatest and most varied of all markets—Paris. He realized it with a sense of amazement.

But there must be a way. He enlarged his scope of speculation. Stowaway? Bah! Take passage on a liner, pretend to have lost his ticket, and trust to Fortune and the name of Marston? But that would mean an appeal to his father, perhaps even a demand on him by the steamship company. Besides, there was the fare to Cherbourg, and incidentals. Appeal to Ambassador Halleck? But that, again, would mean an appeal to his father, though indirectly.

If he only possessed Tom Driscoll's experience and daring! Tom could do anything—and would. And was not he the equal of Tom Driscoll? Ha! His pride rose higher and higher, carrying William Frederick with it in ever-widening circles, until finally he arrived in the realm of pure artistic creation. Here the question of morality ceases to exist. The intellect, freed from the troublesome problems of ethics and legality, conceives, with a sole and single aim, the satisfaction of its own desires.

And then, suddenly, the face of the young man was illumined with a great light. This gave place to a deep, painful frown; and the frown, in its turn, to a sublime

and portentous grin. He crossed to the table for a cigarette and finding the box empty, fished one of his discarded stubs from the porcelain urn and lit it with the detached air of a genius at his easel.

„After all,“ he muttered, „I shall have to ask Tom to help, but not with money. The question is, will he do it? Well—he *must*. I’ll make it as strong as I can. And—let’s see—there’s the William Penn Tablet, and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, and the Statue of Franklin, and the Old Tower—“

William Frederick Marston had achieved an immortal conception.

At this point this tale assumes the dignity and importance of history, and we shall let the chroniclers speak for themselves. From the *Philadelphia Clarion*, September 21<sup>st</sup>:

### **LIBERTY BELL DEFACED**

Name of French Palmist Appears  
in Red Paint on its Surface

Police are at a Loss to Discover Perpetrator of Deed of Vandalism and are in Communication with the State Department at Washington.

Late last evening, or early this morning, some person or persons entered Independence Hall by a window at the rear and defaced the Liberty Bell by painting on it, in large red letters, the following:

*Jules Mercade  
Chiromancien  
37 Rue de Rennes  
Paris*

The outrage was first discovered by H. P. Sawyer, who entered the room at eight o’clock this morning to assume his duties as guardian of the bell. He first noticed that the window leading from the room to the park at the rear was open. Startled, he hurried to the Bell to assure himself of its safety and soundness, and found it disfigured in the manner described above.

The guard whose duty it was to close up the building last night declares that the window was locked by him at nine o’clock; but that question is really of no importance, since the fastening was old and rusty, and could have been easily forced even without the aid of a tool. No one can be found who saw any person either in the park at the rear or near the window. The vandal evidently chose an hour when he was certain to be unobserved. The police have been unable to discover any clue whatever to his whereabouts or identity.

The authorities are at a loss to account for any possible motive. There was no attempt, apparently, at permanent mutilation. The paint used was ordinary house paint, easily removable by the application of turpentine. If it is really, as it seems to be, an advertisement of a French palmister who expects to escape punishment for the outrage he has instigated because of his distant residence from the scene of its commission, Monsieur Mercade will quickly discover his mistake. The State Department has already communicated with the proper authorities at Paris, asking them to apprehend Mercade, and a reply is expected not later than this afternoon.

This deplorable affair has revealed the lamentable lack of proper care by the authorities of our public museums and historical relics. It may be asserted without fear of successful contradiction...

September 22<sup>nd</sup>:

It will be a matter of pleasure and gratification to every patriotic citizen to learn that Jules Mercade, whose name was found painted on the Liberty Bell yesterday morning, was arrested at his rooms at 37 Rue de Rennes, Paris, early yesterday afternoon.

According to Paris dispatches, Mercade exhibited no surprise at his arrest, since which time he has preserved a profound silence. He has even refused to admit his identity, and the police have been unable to establish it, since he appears to have occupied the rooms at 37 Rue de Rennes for only a few days before his arrest. The prisoner seems, indeed, to be much amused at the position in which he finds himself, and it is the opinion of the French authorities that he expects to escape punishment for his act on account of lack of evidence, and then reap the advantage of the publicity his name has received.

Mercade has agreed to dispense with the formality of extradition on condition that he receive first-class steamship accommodations and that there be no outward sign of his status as a prisoner; and to this peculiar bargain the French authorities have agreed at the request of Ambassador Halleck, in order to avoid delay.

He will sail tomorrow from Cherbourg, on the DACONIA, accompanied by a member of the Paris police.

September 29<sup>th</sup>:

If there be such a person as „Jules Mercade“, and if he be responsible for the defacement of the Liberty Bell on September 21, it seems likely that, owing to the bungling of the Paris police, he will go unpunished.

The „Jules Mercade“ whom a police officer brought over on the DACONIA, which arrived at New York yesterday, proved to be no less a personage than William Frederick Marston, son of Jonathan Marston, the New York financier.

Young Marston seems to regard his experience as an amusing escapade, and though he is unable, or unwilling, to explain how he came to be taken for „Jules Mercade“, and indeed refuses to discuss the affair in any way whatever, it is evident that he has enjoyed himself immensely at the expense of the much-vaunted Paris police. He was, of course, immediately released. But Mr. Marston, however much he has enjoyed himself, has aided in the defeat of the ends of justice—though without such intention—by failing to assert and prove his identity at the time of his arrest. No doubt, he had gotten a great deal of fun out of it. But the defacement of the Liberty Bell was an offense against national sentiment and dignity, and all good citizens will agree that...

At about eight o'clock in the evening of the day on which the DACONIA arrived in New York, two men were seated, smoking at the dinner table in the Marston

home on Fifth Avenue. The ladies had departed about fifteen minutes previously. The elder man was puffing thoughtfully on a large black Cazadores; the younger had consumed two cigarettes and was starting on a third.

„That bridge over the Tiber at Athens is wonderful,“ said the younger man suddenly, breaking the oppressive silence with an effort. „I don't wonder you insisted I shouldn't miss it.“ He chattered on for a minute, stammered, and stopped.

„William,“ said the elder man in a voice deep, well modulated, and musical, „You're a perfect ass. Don't try to play the innocent baby with me. I know you too well. At the same time, I have made a discovery. There is one man in this world who is even a bigger idiot than you are.“

Judging by the calm tranquility with which the younger man received these rather forceful phrases, it is to be supposed that he had heard them before. He poured himself a pony of cognac and passed it to and fro under his nose.

„Of course,“ he said, sniffing with appreciation, „you arouse my curiosity. Who may this inconceivable idiot be?“

The elder man drew in a mouthful of smoke and expelled it with the proper care and deliberation before he answered. „The man,“ he said, „who, at your request, painted a monstrous, red, hideous sign on the Liberty Bell of our great country.“ Jonathan Marston, the terrible, smiled reminiscently—a smile of wisdom and understanding.

„And by the way,“ he continued presently, „it is really too bad that your little plot made it necessary to change your address. Of course that was why you missed my last cablegram. My advice to walk home was meant merely as a temporary pill. I wired you five hundred dollars the following day.“

