

The Pay-Yeoman

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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PAYMASTER GARWAY ROSS, attached to and serving on board the United States steamship HELENA, possessed in an eminent degree all of the qualifications mentioned as appertaining to his position.

He also possessed one or two of the flexible virtues and a bitter knowledge of the sourness of the fruit of life. This last it was that drove him to seek the salty masculinity of the wardroom.

On a certain day of the year Paymaster Garway Ross, moved by the inherent laziness of man and a careless irresponsibility peculiar to himself, did a very foolish thing. He gave the combination of the office safe to his yeoman.

The pay yeoman, generally speaking, is the man who does the work of the paymaster. Particularly was this true in the case of Yeoman James Martin and Paymaster Garway Ross.

To the latter a monthly statement was a fearsome labyrinth and a quarterly return a snare of the devil. Also, he hated to count money, always having had so much of his own that he had never been under the necessity of counting it.

Finally, after a year of growing confidence in his yeoman, he entrusted him with the daily balance of the cash and sighed with immense relief.

For two years all was harmony. Paymaster Garway Ross read novels, wore out the lounge in the wardroom, invented mysterious and tantalizing cocktails, while Yeoman Martin wrote and ruled in the pay office two decks below.

Then, on a day in August (the HELENA was at dry dock in New York), Martin announced his intention of applying for a furlough. The paymaster heartily approved, though he realized it meant a temporary burden on his own shoulders.

By a tactful word to the captain he got Martin's week of liberty extended to two; and in his effort to show his appreciation of his yeoman's services, even went so far as to present him with a treasury note of poetic denomination.

This gift, however, Martin steadfastly refused, seemingly on the grounds of personal dignity. The paymaster pocketed the note with great reluctance and waved a cheerful *au revoir* as Martin went down the gangway.

About three o'clock on the following afternoon the paymaster, by a tremendous effort of the will, lifted himself from the wardroom lounge, proceeding to the pay office, made an entry in the provision return, opened the safe, and balanced the cash.

That is, he tried to balance it. It was eight thousand dollars short.

For the remainder of that day, and the whole of the next, Paymaster Garway Ross was thoroughly stunned.

He was conscious of an immense incredulity. This was not based on any real knowledge of Martin's character or belief in his honesty, but originated in and proceeded from the paymaster himself. His mind, limited by its own habits, was incapable of registering so sudden and complete a reversal of conception.

In short, the thing was incredible.

But when, on the morning of the third day and for the fortieth time, he checked up the contents of the safe and found the shortage actually existent he forced himself to recognize the truth and prepare for action.

Owing to certain of the naval regulations, his dilemma was a curious one, for had it become known that he had entrusted the combination of the safe to his yeoman the paymaster would have been court-martialed and probably dismissed from the service; so runs the rule. Obviously, therefore, he could not expose Martin's guilt without at the same time admitting his own.

But the paymaster's sympathies had been smothered by an overwhelming fact—he disliked, as he expressed it to himself, being made the goat for anyone. For a long hour he sat perched on the edge of the office stool, smoking a huge black cigar, revolving schemes innumerable and rejecting each in its turn.

Exactly in proportion as his helplessness became apparent his anger increased, and the cold anger of a brain slow to conceive and strong to retain is to be feared.

It was well for Jimmie Martin that he was many miles away from the berth-deck of the HELENA when Paymaster Ross emerged from the pay office and mounted the officers' ladder to his own room.

The following morning he visited his bankers in Cedar Street, and in exchange for a personal check received eight hundred ten-dollar bills. These he took to the ship and placed in the safe, after which he balanced the cash. He then drew forth a private account-book and turned to a clean page, which he headed, „James Martin.“

Beneath this he wrote: „To experience supplied—\$8000.“

He knew nothing of bookkeeping, however, and the sense of the entry appeared to be somewhat obscure. Accordingly, after a minute of thought, he wrote in the middle of the page in pencil the words: „Account not closed.“

One hot June morning the United States steamship HELENA, with her shining decks and her rakish stack, boomed forth a salute to the commandant and weighed anchor in the harbor of San Juan.

Within half an hour her boats were lowered and her starboard gangway made fast, and a few minutes later the steam launch glided away, headed for the naval station wharf.

The passengers were the captain, paying a call to the commandant; the surgeon, whose errand was personal; and Paymaster Garway Ross, in search of fresh meat. The commissary was paying for a little indiscretion by reposing in solitary grandeur in the brig.

For two years and six months, since the disappearance of Jimmie Martin, the HELENA had roamed the seas and paraded the coast. She had escorted a floating dry dock from Cherbourg to Norfolk, honored a New Orleans Mardi Gras with her presence, twice attended the annual maneuvers at Guantanamo, and made herself generally handy and useful. She was at San Juan in obedience to an order to relieve the CHESTER.

More than two years ago it was that the new pay yeoman had placed a big red „D“ opposite Jimmie Martin's name on the crew payroll, for Martin's furlough, already extended by himself from two weeks to thirty months, seemed likely to become permanent.

Perhaps some day some country deputy would appear at Norfolk or Brooklyn with Martin in one hand and an expense list in the other, and, pocketing the reward for apprehension of a deserter, leave Martin to be sentenced for three dreary years to the prison ship at Portsmouth; but he remained as yet on the list of the wanted. His billet had been filled, his bag and hammock sold at auction, and he had become but a vague and unrecognized number to the roll and the crew of the United States steamship HELENA.

With one exception.

Paymaster Garway Ross did neither forget nor forgive. Perhaps it would be not exactly just to call him vindictive; yet he desired revenge. Almost unconsciously he nursed his anger and the wish for vengeance.

It had never taken the form of active investigation or pursuit. But it was there, smoldering, waiting; just as, according to the scientists, we each harbor within us the sleeping germ of insanity, ready to be raised at any moment to dreadful activity by something that is not within us.

In his search for fresh meat the paymaster followed his nose in and out of three smaller shops before he found the way to the large establishment of Hernandez y Hermanos. Here he found what he wanted.

The elder Hernandez, smiling, courteous, recorded his order for ten hindquarters and the same number of fores, promising immediate delivery and the freshest beeves. Then he turned to a clerk and beckoned sharply.

„No! Mendez! Drive to the storage and bring this,“ he said, handing the clerk a duplicate of the paymaster’s order. „And, going, you may take the scales to the hotel.“

„But there are the jars of Señor Martin—“

„Go, fool!“ the excitable Hernandez shouted. „Bah! Señor Martin can wait.“

An electric thrill, indefinable, illusive, passed through the brain of the paymaster. He decided to disregard it, but it was insistent. He turned to Hernandez.

„Señor Martin?“ he said half indifferently. „Who is this Martin?“

Hernandez was glad to oblige the paymaster.

„Americano,“ he replied. „Coffee planter this side—a little—of Caguas. A very good man, I believe, but small. He pays very well.“

„I think I know him,“ said the paymaster. „What is he like?“ He understood that the „small“ applied to the fortune, not to the person.

„I have never seen him, señor,“ was the reply. „Never does he come to San Juan. He sends money by the carrier and a writing. Every month—sometimes two.“

„Do you keep the orders? Could I see them?“

„Certainly, señor.“

Hernandez trotted to the office at the rear, and after some minutes reappeared with an old letter file. From this he took some papers which he handed to the paymaster.

The paymaster was curiously excited. Whether it was the spoken name of Martin or an awakened recollection of something he had once said about Puerto Rico, or merely the effect of intuition, may not be known; but he was actually quivering with eagerness—the eagerness of bruin roused by the odor of the hidden sweet.

The first paper showed him his mistake. It was an order for three chairs and some glass jars and was signed „S. Martin.“ He gazed at it blankly.

„Pardon, señor,“ said the courteous Hernandez, „but that was written by the señora. For many months she has written. But there are some—“

He rummaged in the pile of papers, drew one forth, and handed it to the paymaster.

And then the face of Garway Ross turned pale and his eyes closed to a narrow slit. Perhaps, after all, he was vindictive. As for the paper—that handwriting! The books of the pay office of the HELENA were full of it.

The next morning but one found the paymaster, mounted on a short-haired native pony, proceeding leisurely along the white, level road that leads from San Juan to the foothills of the Sierra de Luquillo. Feeling sure of his quarry, he had taken his time. He had not questioned the carrier for fear of a possible communication and warning to Señor Martin; but the courteous Hernandez had furnished information of the exact whereabouts of Martin’s plantation.

The paymaster’s intentions were extremely hazy. Strapped about his waist under his coat were two ugly Navy revolvers; yet he was no Corsican. He told

himself that they were meant purely as a defense; he certainly did not premeditate murder. In the meantime there they were.

He did not intend to expose Martin or arrest him; that would have been to expose and betray himself. Nor had he an idea of forcing a material restitution. The loss of the money had been but a slight and temporary annoyance; furthermore, it was to be doubted if Martin had it in his power to repay even a small part of it. Apparently, then, his journey was purposeless.

But still his heart was hot with anger; indefinable, and therefore reasonless. He was not a lover of justice, an avenger of the law, a crusader for the right. He was simply a man with a grudge.

The pony, unlike its rider, was little inconvenienced by the glare of the road and the heat of the tropical sun. For four long hours he trotted on unwearingly, stopping now and then to rest in the shade of a grove of palms, or to drink from one of the bubbling streams dashing toward the foothills below.

At eleven o'clock he turned from the road into a path at the foot of a ridge of limestone cliffs, and three hundred yards farther on came within sight of a low rambling house set at the edge of a small clearing.

This was the home of Señor Martin.

Paymaster Garway Ross stopped his pony and for some minutes sat gazing at the house in silence. Afterward when the scene rose in his memory, he wondered at the rare loveliness of the setting—the charm, even, of the house itself.

In the immediate background was a grove of tillandsia, fragrant and cool. On either side appeared long rows of coffee trees, brilliantly white with their innumerable blossoms; and beyond, at the foot of a sloping valley, could be seen a somber purple patch, relieved here and there by a gorgeous scarlet of nature's most beautiful parasite.

Over all was the heavy fragrance, the droopy languor, of the land of the lotus.

But for the present the paymaster was conscious only of his immediate emotions. For the first time he realized that the enterprise contained an element of real danger.

Martin might even now be observing him from one of those shaded windows; possibly have recognized him. Thinking thus, the paymaster wheeled his pony about and retreated out of sight round a bend in the path.

Here he removed one of the revolvers from the hidden belt and placed it in his side coat pocket; after which precaution he returned to the clearing and rode boldly up to the door of the house.

He had scarcely halted his pony when the door opened and a woman appeared on the threshold.

The paymaster dismounted, lifted his hat, and bowed.

„I want to see James Martin,“ he said.

The woman looked up quickly and for a moment was silent.

Then she spoke in a low, rather harsh voice:

„What about?“

The paymaster bowed again.

„I had rather tell that to Mr. Martin himself,“ he said. „Is he here?“

„No.“ A faint gleam of interest flickered across the woman's face as she added, „Were you a friend of his?“

„Yes,“ said the paymaster inwardly thanking her for the tense, while he wondered at it. „When will he be at home?“

The woman did not answer. Instead after a moment of silence, she turned and called sharply, „Miguel!“

Another moment, and a slouching blinking *hombre* appeared in the doorway.

„Take the pony,“ the woman said shortly.

Then, motioning to the paymaster to follow, she started round the path encircling the house toward the grove of tillandsias in the rear.

The paymaster guessed intuitively what they were to find.

It was in the air, in the woman's tone, in her very silence; and he as silently followed her through the shady grove across a quivering log bridge, and into a second grove more deeply shaded than the first. She halted abruptly by a giant tillandsia, and the paymaster approached and stood at her side.

He had guessed correctly. At their feet was a slender mound of earth covered with coarse grass; and at its farther end was a rude block of limestone bearing this inscription:

JAMES MARTIN
Died December 22, 1907
Age 24

The woman sat on the trunk of a fallen tree and gazed at the stone impassively, in silence. Finally the paymaster turned to her.

„So,“ he said, „six months ago.“

The woman nodded.

„I am Paymaster Ross, of the navy,“ he continued presently. „Perhaps you have heard him speak of me. I knew your—him—“

„My son,“ said the woman dully.

At this the paymaster felt a slight surprise; somehow he had never thought of Martin as having a mother. He knew that he ought to speak, to say something; but he felt that there was nothing he could possibly say, nothing worth saying.

Finally, „He was a good boy,“ he observed awkwardly.

Again the woman nodded.

„I suppose he was. He spoke a lot about you. He always said you was kind to him. I suppose I ought to thank you.“

„Won't you tell me more about it?“ said the paymaster. „I mean about him, and how he came down here, and how he—about the end.“

Then he seated himself beside her and waited.

She began with a grim smile.

„There was a time then I could have talked all about it,“ she observed. „Somehow I don't feel like it anymore. And it's all Jimmie's fault. Maybe you're right. Maybe he was a good boy and all that; but somehow he never seemed to get anywhere.“

She paused and sighed heavily, and the paymaster rose to his feet and stood looking down at the grave.

„He was just like his father.“

As the woman continued, her voice held a new note of bitterness, and the paymaster shuddered.

„He died when Jimmie was twelve years old and the others was babies. He always was a fool, and Jimmie was just like him. Then, after I'd starved and slaved to death nearly, Jimmie got that money from the navy.

„He called it a bonus. I never understood about it. I never wanted him to go in the navy anyway; but then that was all right. And then, when he got all that money, he made us all come down here, where it's only fit for niggers.

„And Annie and Tom are always sick, too. I used to wonder about it and I wouldn't be surprised if he stole it. Annie and Tom are the others. You didn't see 'em as you came in from the road?“

With an effort the paymaster turned to face her and shook his head.

„No. But he—he was a good worker.“

His own words sounded in his ear hollow, inane. Here all was dust and ashes. Words were useless.

„Perhaps,“ the woman continued. „But when a woman like me has had her whole life spoiled by a man and his son, she can't think very well of either of 'em. He should have given me that money; I'd earned it. But he talked about Annie and Tom, and what he'd do for 'em, and brought us all off down here where it's only fit for niggers.

„And now he's gone and I can't get anybody to stay here, and the niggers won't work, and we're worse off than ever. He ought to stayed in the navy. At least, we got forty dollars a month from him then.“

The paymaster forced himself to speak.

„But the place seems to be in good condition. Couldn't you sell it?“

The woman laughed—a harsh crackling laugh that gave the paymaster an involuntary shiver of disgust. Then she waved a hand toward the long stretch of white blossoms on either side of the house.

„They look pretty, don't they?“ she said with infinite sarcasm. „Yes, they look pretty all right. But they're all eat up with worms. There's something wrong with 'em inside. Of course, I tried to sell out as soon as he was gone. He might have done it himself.“

Again the paymaster made a weak attempt to probe beneath the crust.

„But he was a good boy, Mrs. Martin,“ he said. „And from what you say, I judge that he gave you all he had. He did everything he could. And now—now that he is gone—“

For a moment the woman stared at him almost wonderingly. Then she gave a short laugh.

„That's a fool notion,“ she said. „I guess I know what you mean. It sounds just like him. What's the difference if he's dead? He's better off than I am. But then, of course, you was his friend.“

She stopped abruptly and sat gazing at the paymaster in a sort of stupid antagonism.

But the paymaster was silenced. The fruit of life! And he—not knowing—for what had he come? His eyes, as he turned them for the last time on the grave of Jimmie Martin, were eloquent and—if that may be—tender.

But the dust of the grave has no ears—perhaps! He wondered and turned to go.

The woman made no motion to follow or to speak. Was she somehow aware that her harsh and gloomy note had been used by the poet to complete the rhythm of a scheme awful and beautiful? Had she played her part knowing and yet helpless?

She barely glanced up as the paymaster passed her. He moved swiftly. At the log bridge he turned and looked back. She was sitting as he had left her, her head bowed forward, and he shuddered as he conceived her likeness to the hovering form of the bird of death.

It was a week or so later that the pay yeoman of the HELENA was seated at his desk, striving valiantly to bring order out of chaos. He was trying to strike a balance from the vague and cryptic entries of a private account-book which the paymaster had asked him to check up.

The paymaster was seated on the edge of the desk, smoking a huge black cigar.

„I don't know,“ said the pay yeoman, scratching his head in perplexity. „Which are receipts and which expenditures?“

„Why, they're in a sort of chronological order,“ said the paymaster vaguely. „But it must be mostly expenditures.“

The yeoman sighed hopelessly and turned over some half-dozen pages. Then he gazed at the book reflectively, tapping his teeth with the end of a penholder.

„Now, here, for instance,“ he said. „Here's an entry: *James Martin. To experience supplied—\$8000.* Does that mean you gave him eight thousand, or did he give it to you?“

The paymaster did not reply. Instead, he leaned over the yeoman's shoulder and gazed at the page for a full minute in silence.

Then he took the book from the yeoman, erased something written on the page in pencil, and taking a pen from the desk, printed across it in big black letters the word „Paid.“

Then he returned the book to the yeoman.

„But was it a receipt or an expenditure?“ persisted the other. „That doesn't mean anything.“

„It means a good deal to me,“ said the paymaster.

„And,“ he added to himself as he turned to leave the office, „to Jimmie.“

