

The Secret Of The Mosaics

By
Broughton Brandenburg

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BRDERICK was in a worried and ill-tempered frame of mind. He was stalking up and down, picking up magazines from the table of the city library and trying to read them, only to hurl them back with so much unnecessary noise that I said to him:

"See here, Brod, several of your humble fellow-members are trying to read. What is wrong with you? What has upset you? If you won't tell me, at least stop your rumpus."

He turned on me sharply.

"It is the sight of you or rather the remembrance of what you stand for that keeps me from forgetting what is on my mind. Hang it! I may as well tell you."

A dozen other men about pricked up their ears.

"You and your partner Rand are professional investigators of the problems and puzzles of this troubled human life. He is the cleverest man alive and you—well, you know how to look wise. I am tormented by a desire to tell you, or somebody who can think it out, a perfectly foolish, entirely absurd set of circumstances which has come under my notice. They amount to nothing at all and yet they are arousing my curiosity."

The whole room was listening.

"Curiosity is the bane of the mind. An unexplained fact passed over is the beginning of mental undidness," said Lawrence Rand's quiet, distinct voice from the doorway behind us. "Go on, Broderick, perhaps the trivial will lead to the important."

"Well, I will, on one condition. You two are not in this business for the entertainment you derive from it and I suppose you know that I am not likely to embarrass myself when I ask you to undertake this case on a generous retainer and pursue it to a finish at my cost."

"Very well," said Rand. The listening members, seeing badinage turning into business, turned away and several were about to leave the room.

"No, no. Don't go, you fellows. I want everybody to hear this, only don't laugh at me. Last night just before six o'clock I went into Langstader's stationery store on Sixth Avenue just south of Herald Square and asked for a dozen paper napkins. I wanted just that sort of paper on which to lay some damp specimens to dry, and it occurred to me that paper napkins were quite what I wanted. A pretty little black-eyed woman behind the counter spoke up when I stated my requirements.

"I am sorry," she said, "but we have just sold every one we had."

"Nonsense, there are nine gross down in that third drawer," said a man behind the counter.

"No, they are all gone," corrected the woman; "even the broken lots. A young man came in here in a rush just before lunch to-day and asked for all the paper napkins I had. He got fourteen hundred and ten."

"If you will wait just a minute, sir," said the man—he may have been the proprietor of the place, judging from his manner—I will send across the street and get some."

"I waited while the boy went out. He was gone an unmercifully long time and at last arrived on the run, out of breath, clutching the two-dollar bill he had taken to pay for his purchase."

"Dey ain't none in no place around. I been clean over to Ate Av'noo. Dey says some guy bought 'em all out to-day."

"We all laughed and I walked out, but it suddenly struck me as extremely queer that any man who really wanted a large quantity of paper napkins should not telephone a wholesale house. He would have saved time, money and trouble. There was no excuse such as the wholesale stores being closed, for it was Tuesday in the middle of the day that he was buying and everything was wide open in all New York. On my way home I passed two places that might sell paper napkins and I went in. Both were sold out. Both had sold to a handsome young man. The last place was on Broadway close to Fifty-seventh Street, more than a mile from Langstader's. Now, Lawrence Rand, Prince of Pryers—tell me what that fellow wanted with all those broken lots of paper napkins!"

There was a little nervous laughter among the assembled men, but it was plain to me that the simple problem had sunk deep into their minds.

It adds nothing to the main thread of this story to say that inside of an hour every man in the club had heard the premises and that the most interesting evening we have ever had ensued. Imagine one hundred men cudgeling their brains for probable explanations of this odd but most trivial occurrence. I mention it merely to show how many of us are much more curious than we will admit.

Next morning, at Rand's suggestion I telephoned the jobbing houses downtown and soon found that the few that handled paper napkins had received no unusual orders; in fact, no orders from dealers or individuals not known to them. In a word, before we left the house, we were sure that our mysterious young buyer of paper napkins had confined his efforts to the retail field.

We went first to Langstader's and then the neighboring stores. This was Wednesday morning the eighteenth of May, and by Thursday evening, when we sat down to dinner at the club, the field had been swept clean and the facts before us were these:

The buyer of the napkins was a handsome fellow of about thirty years, dressed in a dark suit with a pin stripe, a black derby and patent leather button-shoes. His eyebrows were black and heavy. The left upper incisor was of gold and there was a white triangular scar on one ear-top. His ears were the dark red of a healthy vigorous man of his type. This description was carefully pieced out of more than one hundred versions of his appearance.

We soon found that he had bought out the paper napkin stock of every store in circle the approximate centre of which was about Madison Square when we checked it off on the map. The total of his purchases was about one hundred thousand napkins. In each case he had carried away the packets himself or when they were very large had called for them later in the day and piled them in a cab. He had done that at a store on Fourteenth Street and also at one in Thirty-fourth Street where they had a large stock. His cheerful, nonchalant manners were those of a Westerner and nothing about him suggested the lunatic or crank. His funds were mostly in fresh twenty and fifty-dollar bills. That was all that we could rake or scrape and Rand went carefully over every detail with Broderick, Hargreaves and every

club member who could get within hearing distance that night.

"But," said Broderick, "can't you give us a guess as to what he wanted with a hundred thousand paper napkins, purchased at the retail stores, which he could have bought at a ridiculously lower cost wholesale? Isn't there anything on which to hang a conjecture?"

"Frankly, old man, I am more puzzled than I was in the beginning, for I have satisfied myself that out of my two hundred barely possible explanations not one fits the facts. I have not the faintest glimmer of light on the real 'why'."

There was a long pause, then some one ventured a remark and soon the whole place was a-hum with the talk of the bewildered club members.

"Mr. Rand, just a moment," said Reynolds, coming up to us about an hour later. "This is Dr. Reiter, an eye and ear specialist, who dined with me to-night. He and I agree that on last Tuesday evening about seven o'clock we saw a young man in evening dress in the Waldorf-Astoria who answers your description, particularly the white scar on the red ear. Dr. Reiter noticed it, being interested in such things, and mentioned it to me."

"Come on, Dunk, I think we have hit the trail," cried Rand.

"Why so?"

"Well, that little scar observed so definitely and carefully by a specialist like Dr. Reiter is a clincher on identity. He, doubtless, was living at the Waldorf. Let us go and see."

In half an hour we knew from a dozen porters and clerks that there was such a guest. He had not been there long. None knew his name or room number, but all had seen him.

"But, see here," said Rand to the head bell-boy when we were about at the end of our string, "to what room in this hotel did several hundred packages go on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday?"

"Suite 501, sir," the man answered instantly.

"How do you know?"

"There was more small square stuff went into that place them days than I ever see before in any job I ever been in. Everybody knows it. Just ask the door stuf up there."

Rand now stated his full case to the management. In two minutes we knew that Suite 501 had harbored "Mr. William Walling, Chicago," who had arrived Sunday night, with a suit-case only. He had baggage checks but had been unable to get his trunks and had left Wednesday night. There were no telephone calls or messenger calls on his bill and he received no mail that they could recall. That was all the office could tell.

It is only by chance that I have anything to add to this story. Chance? No, only by reason of my wonderful sense of perception. Three weeks had gone by without one new fact being adduced. Tom Rahway and I kept watch on the New York stores, wholesale and retail, by occasional telephoning, to see if the napkin-buying should be resumed, but it never was. The part the napkin had played in some big game was finished.

Rand, Tom Rahway and I were leaving the Van Norden Building on Fifth Avenue on the twentieth of June, when just as we reached the curb a big red touring-car came swinging around the corner out of the side street into the avenue. The only occupant of the car was the driver, well shielded in motor rig. He shot by us within four feet of our faces. Rand clutched my arm.

"Quick, Dunk! There's our man!"

The only identifying thing Rand could have seen was the tell-tale ear. I asked no question, for I knew that was the point. In front of the bank stood a vacant Mercedes, which I recognized as belonging to a friend of ours. Rand caught sight of it as he whirled about seeking means to follow. Without a word he sprang for it and was already opening up as Tom Rahway and I clambered into the rear seat.

We lost time by being under the necessity of turning around and, as we headed up the avenue, we could just make out the flying car in the scattered traffic of the mid-forenoon, perhaps seven blocks away.

The steady subdued hum of the splendidly balanced and groomed machine under us was reassuring, and with Rand's adroit steering and vantage-taking, we lost no further time, so that while not running at a speed to attract undue attention from the police, we were nevertheless gaining on the other car. About Nineteenth Street we were but two blocks behind. At

One Hundred and Ninth Street we were almost alongside. Rand drove as close as he dared and hauled the solitary motorist in a friendly tone.

Mr. William Walling, such he was, turned quickly, gave us one frightened look and then threw on speed with a leap. Away he went around into One Hundred and Tenth Street, cutting across our nose, and before we could possibly meet his move in kind he was two blocks away. He swung into Manhattan Avenue and still a dozen feet gone. In a few minutes we saw him top the nose before Bushwick old place and hustle across the hall to me in the evening and continue that until I have enough."

"I sought all day Monday and all day Tuesday and had almost swept the up-town held by Wednesday afternoon. When I passed them in she said:

"Remain in your room after dinner and expect me."

When we arrived, she got Suite 503 at the Waldorf and I registered as 'Walling' on her orders and got Suite 501. She went on the books as 'Mrs. Elinore Kent, London.' Before going up she bade me good-night.

"Now, Mr. Walling, begin to-morrow morning and collect all the paper napkins you can find in all the stores about here. Get them to your apartment. Pass them across the hall to me in the evening and continue that until I have enough."

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