

Mr. Philibus—
Thousand-Dollar Man

Leslie Gordon Barnard

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Title: Mr. Philibus--Thousand-Dollar Man

Date of first publication: 1930

Author: Leslie Gordon Barnard (1890-1961)

Date first posted: 31st August, 2024

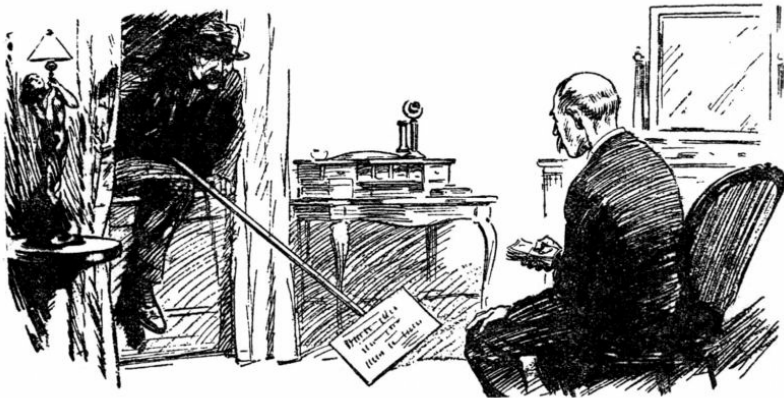
Date last updated: 31st August, 2024

Faded Page eBook #20240815

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Pat McCoy & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Mr. Philibus— Thousand-dollar Man

MR. PHILIBUS PROTECTS THIS GENTLE
CREATURE
BY USING HIM IN HIS OWN TRICK.



By Leslie Gordon Barnard

Author of "Green-handed!" etc.

Tilted comfortably back in a chair in his hotel bedroom, Mr. Philibus read an evening paper and chuckled to himself. His most recent exploit was still news. Quite a daring affair; almost more venturesome than should be undertaken by a gentleman with a passion for liberty of movement.

Moreover, it was now a full week since the coup had been pulled off. And here, not a stone's throw from the scene itself, sat the perpetrator calmly chuckling over his success.

Setting aside the paper, he descended in the hotel elevator and walked calmly through the crowded rotunda, exchanging a wink with the telephone operator, who did not discourage the attention, and a cigar with the house detective, who liked good brands and felt very friendly toward this respectable middle-aged guest.

Mr. Philibus, exposing the headlines concerning himself, tapped the paper to call the detective's attention to it.

"Surprised you haven't nabbed the reward offered," he said laughing. "This bird likely enough is hanging around places such as this. I should, in his shoes. Much safer than making a get-away!"

"Naw," said the house detective. "These birds ain't got the nerve for that. Believe me, this bird you speak of is half a continent away."

"With your experience," said Mr. Philibus mildly, "doubtless you are correct."

"I just wish," said the house detective quickly, "he was hereabouts. That thousand bucks would fit very pretty in the pocket of yours truly!"

Mr. Philibus considered this.

"Well, now," he said, "on second thought, I'm not quite so sure I'd care about that reward. Old Grewgerry is offering it himself, you know!"

"Sure! Why not? Ain't he the guy that got the loot stole off him, and got biffed up pretty bad himself. Fetched him a pretty crack in the eye, this crook did, and beat him up plenty, besides taking enough from his safe to make any man mad!"

"After all," said Mr. Philibus quietly, "is anybody very sorry for Grewgerry? If that man had all the oil, produced or prospective, out of the oil wells he's foisted on a dizzy public, he'd not have enough to anoint his ugly bald head!"

The detective laughed.

“He’s a smooth one all right,” he declared half admiringly. “Keeps within the law, though. That’s brains, that is! You got to hand it to him for that. He’s kep’ himself out of jail nicely.”

“And sent better men to jail,” said Mr. Philibus evenly. “And sent widows to paupers’ graves, and children on to the streets with his pretty schemes. I’d like to see the man who would take his dirty money!”

The detective chuckled, but his eyes gleamed a little.

“Well, take a good look, mister!” he suggested.

“At you?” said Mr. Philibus grimly now.

“At me!”

“You’d take his filthy money?”

“For a thousand dollars,” said the other, “I’d not care to say what I’d do!” He laughed again. “He must want this guy pretty bad to go a thousand!”

“I fancy,” said Mr. Philibus dreamily, “he’s a little put out!”

“Well, I shouldn’t be surprised. I know him. He often comes in here, and I’ve heard him boast nobody can get the better of him. Gosh, here he is now!”

Mr. Philibus veered round. A podgy, ill-shapen figure, evidently only recently out of medical care, had entered the rotunda. Mr. Philibus’ eyes narrowed. He could wish now he’d given the fellow a richer dose. His pride had certainly not been taken down. Grewgerry swaggered in with three friends as if he owned the hotel. They came to a halt not far from where Mr. Philibus stood.

“Personal grudge?” Grewgerry was saying. “Maybe he had! Lots of people fancy they have something against me. Wonder why?” Four tones of laughter merged. “Naw, I’m not afraid of a repetition. The fellow’s the other side of the country by now. Yellow, these chaps. If he hadn’t had me at a disadvantage, I’d have laid him out proper. You could see he’d have run if I’d had half a chance. No, sir, you’ll not see Josiah J. Grewgerry bitten twice in the same place!”

Mr. Philibus sneezed.

“What’s that?” The detective swung around. “Was that you?” The little group round Grewgerry had turned also.

“Sneeze!” said Mr. Philibus. “Hasn’t a man a right to sneeze in a free land? Woof!”

Mr. Josiah Grewgerry and his three friends went to the cigar counter, equipped themselves with the fattest and best, then adjourned to a quiet portion of the lobby, where they kept an anticipatory concentration on the door. Every time it revolved to usher in a newcomer, they were all attention.

“Maybe,” said one of them, “he won’t come, Grewgerry!”

“Come?” Grewgerry laughed. “You couldn’t keep this hick away with a ten-foot pole with a spoke on the end. No, I reckon he’s so overcome with the honor of dinin’ with four leadin’ representatives of big business he can’t get the studs into his soup-and-fish shirt, if he has one!”

A tall, sallow member of the party laughed.

“By the time we get through with him, he’ll not have any kind of a shirt left!”

“There he is!” said Grewgerry.

“That?”

“The same!”

“Weeping willows, isn’t he a perfect lamb!”

The man who approached now, to whose timid advance Grewgerry moved forward with smiling countenance and welcoming hand, was perhaps four feet nine inches tall; being thus cast by nature, he had achieved through the fifty or more years of his life a habit of looking up hopefully at his taller fellows. The skillful gentlemen who portray in cartoons Mr. General Public must have gone to him for the pince-nez, the sad mustache, and other essentials of that composite character.

“Mr. Blaine.” said Grewgerry expansively, leading him forward, “meet Mr. Waldenus. Waldenus, Mr. Blaine, the gentleman from the West I was speaking about. Graham, Mr. Blaine. And Porter! Have a cigar. Mr. Blaine. No? Well, I don’t know as I blame you. Funny habit before dinner. Perhaps we might as well go on in, gentlemen?”

Little Mr. Blaine, who looked equally ready to bolt and to accept and enjoy his moment of bliss in this distinguished company, adjusted his shirt studs nervously, after the manner of a man who is not sure when they will pop and expose the honest wool beneath, and was shepherded into the glitter and expensive simplicity of the dining room.

Grewgerry, handling even the amazing head waiter as one accustomed to obeisance, winked at Waldenus.

Little Mr. Blaine, still agitated about the propensities of his studs, sat down on his chair, his face—full of a painful ecstasy—not very high above an array of silver and cutlery calculated to terrify the stoutest heart.

“You left your wife well, I hope, Mr. Blaine?”

“Thank you, Mr. Grewgerry—yes!”

“You are fortunate in having a wife, Mr. Blaine, whose instincts are progressively businesslike. I have explained to you, gentlemen, I think”—he waved a hand at his company—“that Mr. and Mrs. Blaine have come into a nice little legacy, and intend to invest it with discretion and profit. They noticed the offering of Commonlite Unlimited Oil and at once recognized its supreme attractiveness. That Mr. Blaine should come all the way here to look into it personally is gratifying. One’s faith in human perspicacity is shaken so often by people who rush madly into speculation.

“Look,” said Mr. Grewgerry shaking his head sadly, “at the awful debacle of the stock market! And have some hors d’œuvre, Mr. Blaine. Terrible how some people rush into danger that way. Now take oil—an essential industry—a bed-rock industry. There,” said Mr. Grewgerry, emphasizing the position with a sardine, “there’s the property; it can’t run away, it can’t dissolve; all you got to do is get the oil out of it and a ready market’s waiting. You can see that, Mr. Blaine!”

Little Mr. Blaine, worrying an olive with a fork, cheyving it with the tines around the side of his plate, race-course fashion, agreed that he could see, that indeed anybody could see. Just then Mr. Grewgerry, having a passion for them, swallowed the sardine, but just a little of the oil remained. Mr. Grewgerry, being quick on the uptake, pointed out, humorously, the symbolism of even this.

“Oil!” he enthused. “You can’t escape it! Soup, Mr. Blaine? Let me recommend the pôtage!”

The symbolism of the soup, Mr. Grewgerry left untouched. He went on, through several courses, to point out Mr. Blaine’s excellent chances of getting in on the ground floor; then, leaving all this material to sink into Mr. Blaine’s head, which was capable of much absorption that way, he spoke with the three gentlemen of developments likely. Mr. Blaine might be excused if he felt he was being privileged to listen in at a directors’ meeting of the Commonlite Unlimited Oil.

There was quite a bit of talk about the ground floor. Mr. Blaine could not help being impressed. Nobody mentioned the basement, nor yet the blue sky

that was above if you flew high enough.

“Café noir, Mr. Blaine? Now here’s the agreement, if you’d care to glance over it. Quite usual and ordinary. And if you’ll just sign—here——” He glanced up. “What’s that, boy?”

“Call for Mr. Blaine!”

“In a moment,” said Grewgerry, frowning.

“It’s urgent, sir! This way, please!”

Little Mr. Blaine, being easily led, succumbed to this uniformed urge, and followed in bewilderment, still clinging to his napkin as to a life preserver. A stout, pleasant-featured gentleman met him in the shadow of a palm in the lobby.

A colloquy, which Mr. Blaine could not hear, ensued between the boy and this pleasant-faced gentleman.

“I got him, sir. They were just getting him to sign something!”

“Good grief! He hadn’t——”

“No, sir. I stuck by until he came along!”

“Good lad! Got any use for a coupla dollars? And not a word to any one, see? I’d not like to appear in it. These fellows keep more or less within the law!”

“Very good, sir!”

“Hello, did you drop that?”

“Where, sir?”

“Over there by the pillar!”

The boy stooped and picked up a small envelope. It was marked, “To the House Detective!”

“I should give it to him!” said Mr. Philibus. “Somebody must’ve dropped it—perhaps purposely. Don’t mention I suggested so. I don’t think he likes me so well!”

The boy grinned, and was off like a shot.

“Bright lad!” said Mr. Philibus. “Ah, Mr. Blaine, I’m sorry to keep you waiting, and indeed to disturb you at dinner, but I happened to be dining near your table to-night, and I wondered if you’d forgive my having a word with you!”

The bell hop, meanwhile, crushing the two-dollar bill affectionately in his hand and transferring it to a slit that evidently made connection with a pocket, set out immediately on the house detective's trail. He was a bright boy, quick to make money and slow to spend it, who could size up the financial intentions of a patron with amazing technique, who knew the value of a frank eye and a silent tongue, who could teach diplomats the nice nuances of accommodating oneself to compromises, and who, in due time, if not hung, would doubtless rise high by other means.

"Letter for you!" he told the house detective, who was passing a friendly and boastful word with a telephone operator who, just having turned over her duties to a successor, was powdering her nose and remembering that the house detective—even if he had a largish nose and a small mind—was a man, and seemed willing to spend money on a girl, if encouraged. His name, of course, was against him. One could go only so far with a man named Croocrab. Mrs. Croocrab? The little Croocrabs? Not if she knew it!

"Where'd you get it?"

"Found it on the floor!"

"Floor? Where?"

"The lobby. Over that way!"

"How did it come there?"

"Ask it. I saw it and picked it up!"

The blonde was becoming impatient. Blondes can be like that. They like gentlemen to be gentlemen.

"Guess I'll move along!" she said.

"Hold up!" cried Mr. Croocrab, "Sorry, kiddo—just a matter of business!"

The blonde pouted. Properly done, it was effective. Mr. Croocrab felt his heart turn over. He forgot the letter; or rather held it, fiddling with it playfully.

"Girlie," he said, "I'm a plain-spoken man. I don't mind saying I like you!"

"Well, I'd hate to have you say it if it hurt!"

"Don't be snappy with poppa!" said Mr. Croocrab humorously. "Baby, if I could only cop that coin I was talking to a guy about to-day we'd step pretty, you and me. A thousand bucks! There's the paper, see? Good description of him. Black hair and mustache—black as the devil—fair size, scar over right cheek curved like a crescent! Can you beat it? That's a give-away—a scar like that. Was he within a hundred miles, I don't mind sayin' I could spot this bird

like a shot. But there's no luck that way.

"Some dick with half my brains'll get that coin way out in the woollies. Chap I was chinnin' with to-day, says: 'What if this bird was right in the hotel, it'd be a good place to hide.' That's brains, eh? The way some people let their chins wag would paralyze you. Baby, I'm a man of few words. 'Deeds, not words,' is the motto I was brung up on since infancy. Baby, if I ever land anything like this"—he hit the paper—"you and me'll step a cake walk to the altar, and shuffle names!"

The blonde's eyes were fixed upon him with the horrid fascination of one seeing visiting cards with "Croocrab" on them. The vision held her silent for the moment. Mr. Croocrab continued: "If I could lay a single finger on this bird he'd look cheap—cheap all right."

Mr. Croocrab's finger, as it happened, was at that moment poking open the letter he had forgotten. It was a mechanical movement, as was the pulling forth of the letter inside.

A queer look overcame him. He paled. The words moved before him like living things:

Watch your step! The thousand-dollar-on-his-head man is in your hotel. If you want to be in on this, look for instructions under the fifth palm in Peacock Alley.

ONE INTERESTED IN YOUR CAREER.

It was on delicately scented paper. The hand was apparently a feminine scrawl. Mr. Croocrab felt at once elated and faint. He waved a hand at the blonde.

"Gotta go!" he said chokingly. "See you again, girlie! I'm on the trail of money."

He moved off.

The blonde flirted her head.

"Yeah!" she said to her reflection in her purse mirror. "On the trail of money is good. The big boob got a letter from some dame! Crab is good! He's fishy all right!"

The house detective, however, had no thoughts to waste on her now. A thousand dollars was in prospect, and the prestige which such a capture would give him. Desire ran ahead of his intelligence. This might very well be a poor joke on some one's part. It was like a treasure hunt, being sent to the fifth palm

in Peacock Alley. The alley, as it was popularly known, ran from the end of the lobby, in narrow splendor, to the dining room. On either side were luxurious chairs and couches on which one might sit, at meal hours, and watch the great and the near-great parade like peacocks to be fed by a keeper.

Finding the fifth palm, Mr. Croocrab had little difficulty in discovering a further note, thrust out of sight, but easily revealing itself to the initiate.

He tore it open and read:

Room No. 314. Knock before entering and watch for further instructions. One thousand dollars hangs on it.

AN ADMIRER.

Mr. Croocrab, placing his large nose against the paper, sniffed, again identifying that delicate scent. An admirer? Some lady who desired to help him? Straightening his shoulders, and putting on an air of extreme efficiency and courage, lest the lady be watching from some seclusion, he strode down Peacock Alley, and sought the room clerk.

“Who’s No. 314?” he asked.

“314? Just taken!”

“Name?” demanded Mr. Croocrab hoarsely.

“Name of Blaine!” said the clerk. “Why, what’s up?”

But Mr. Croocrab had departed. He was heading for the elevator. Just taken! There must be something in this, after all.

He stepped into a waiting elevator.

“Third floor!” said Mr. Croocrab imperiously.

Little Mr. Blaine sat on the least comfortable chair in a room so luxuriously appointed that at first he could do nothing but stare at the splendor, and murmur to himself:

“My gumdrops, if only Martha could see this! My gumdrops, if it don’t beat all!”

Behind this perhaps superficial wonder whirled a maze of conflicting emotions, which, not being able either to catalogue or subdue, he pushed from him. In the last ten minutes things had happened to him. Here he was in undisputed possession of this splendid room, and his bag, his galoshes, his

umbrella, his second-best suit, his picture of Martha—tinted—his nightwear and his toilet accessories were all in a fifth-floor room in Brown’s Commercial and Family Hotel seven blocks away.

He could still hear the quiet, convincing voice of the pleasant-faced gentleman, stating:

“Mr. Blaine, you will forgive my interference in your affairs, but you are about to be fleeced by men too crooked to be crooks. I don’t ask you to take my word; I do ask—but are you rooming in this hotel?”

“No, sir!” said Mr. Blaine weakly. “I’m at Brown’s——”

“Oh, my dear sir! Oh, my dear sir,” the pleasant gentleman had protested. “Won’t do at all. You must move in here immediately. You must meet men like these on their own level. A man of your intelligence, Mr. Blaine, will see that at once. Let me recommend either room 514 or 314. All the upper fourteens have a good view; I’m in 415 myself. I’ll wait here while you book it! And do make haste! There’s not a moment to lose!”

It was useless for Mr. Blaine to protest. His protests against life had never been heeded much. And this nice gentleman was evidently his friend.

“You book,” said the gentleman, “right over there! And say nothing why—except that you are changing your hotel. They’ll send for your things later, if you wish. But hurry please! These gentlemen who wish to fleece you will be out of the dining room any moment, and you must be prepared to meet them in a proper background. A man of your evident intelligence, Mr. Blaine, can see that right away!”

Properly pleased at this fair estimate, Mr. Blaine suffered his feet to carry him to the desk.

“514?” said the room clerk. “Um—taken, I’m afraid. 314? Yes, that’s a good room; nice view as you say. And vacant. You want your luggage sent for?”

He struck a bell. Mr. Blaine, placing on the page of the register open for him a signature that would have wiped out his and Martha’s savings had he written it a short time before when requested, meekly followed the boy to the elevator. He looked round for the pleasant-faced gentleman who had tipped him off to this, but could see him nowhere. A slight perturbation filled him, a hesitation, but, with this uniformed juvenile bargaining on ahead, there was no drawing back.

So here he was!

It was all very confusing, but not finally unpleasant. He only wished Martha could see this room. A gentle breeze of early summer moved to him through the open window, which had two advantages: a far view over a public square now spattered with lights in the dusk, and the iron security of a fire escape that continued up above, and led down below. Martha had said to be sure and locate the fire escape first off, and to have his trousers and slippers handy at night.

The soft wind came pleasantly in at the window. And then, suddenly, unbelievably, and terrifying, it was borne in upon Mr. Blaine that something more than early summer air had come in the window.

“Make no outcry!” said a cool voice. “Not a hair of your head will be hurt if you keep cool and do as I say!”

Mr. Blaine, stricken beyond the point of vocalization, his few hairs standing up on his baldish pate, gave a look, and fainted away. And, at that moment, a gentle knocking sounded outside his door.

The knuckles of House Detective Croocrab having achieved nothing by gentleness became more insistent, and, this failing, he called the floor manageress and opened the door with the master key.

Imperiously bidding the lady of the keys to stand aside out of danger, Mr. Croocrab made a cautious but impressive entrance, to find, as he thought, a little and most unimpressive man asleep in a chair. A moment later, the true situation was revealed.

“Water! Brandy! Stimulants!” ordered Mr. Croocrab with quick intelligence. “Naw, hold on, the guy’s coming round!”

Little Mr. Blaine blinked up into the face of the detective, and seeing what he did, was about to faint away again, when the sight of the floor manageress with a glass of water revived him. Mrs. Scruton, the manageress, reminded him of Martha. She was at once efficient and homely.

Mr. Blaine made sounds in his throat. Eventually, he managed words:

“A man!” he said. “Through the window! Off the fire escape!”

Mr. Croocrab caught the victim ungently by the shoulder.

“Quick! Describe him!”

“Dark!” said Mr. Blaine, waving his hands as if to push the mental vision away. “Very dark. And a terrible scar on his cheek! Horrible!”

“Lovely!” amended Mr. Croocrab eagerly. He dashed to the window.

Against the steel blue of the sky the fire escape hung in uncompromising ugliness; perhaps it struck Mr. Croocrab as sinister, for he hung back, then, very cautiously peered out. Sufficient light enabled him to see that nothing noteworthy menaced one in the length between here and the roof, so, cautiously, he swung a leg out, and let his body follow. Little Mr. Blaine, staggering forward, but remaining at a discreet distance, stood watching this exit, and wringing his hands.

Encouraged by the fact that no shots or other dangers met him, Mr. Croocrab—not liking the darkness below—chose to go above, and if there had been any hesitation in this course, it would have been swept aside by a sudden call from above him.

“Help! Help! Help!”

Startled, he turned his eyes upward and beheld, from a window above, a tousled head outthrust.

With instant courage, Mr. Croocrab responded. Running up the intervening flight of iron steps, he flung himself into the room through the window opened widely to him, from which the human presence had now gone. As he effected his entrance, he heard the slam of a door, and was confronted with a gentleman in pajamas and dressing gown, who cried:

“Gone!”

“Gone?”

“A dark man with a scar. I saw that very clearly as he passed that mirror there. He came in the window.”

The detective raced to the door and flung it open.

“Which way?”

“I couldn’t say. He slammed the door right in front of me!”

Mr. Croocrab, running up and down a little like an overheated hen, made investigation hither and yon, inquiring of maids, of elevator boys, of bell hops, then returning, inquired:

“What did he do? He came in the window——”

“And went directly to the door. I’d got into my night things a bit early, and had been lying on the bed a few minutes before all this happened! I——”

“Why!” cried Mr. Croocrab. “It’s you!”

“Sure, it’s me!” said Mr. Philibus with ungrammatical humility, and then,

aggrievedly: “If that isn’t the guy that the thousand dollars is offered for, I’ll eat my dressing gown! I told you, didn’t I, he might hide around here?”

“Yeah,” said Mr. Croocrab ruminatingly. “So you did. How did you get that way?”

Mr. Philibus looked the detective squarely in the eye.

“Between you and me,” he confided, “I saw something that looked like him once before I spoke to you that way, only you know how it is—it’s hard to believe that kind of thing. But I thought it was no harm hinting it to you. Say, this place seems full of crooks. I saved a little country chap from your friend Grewgerry just now! Got him away, and suggested he take a room here. He’s in 314 or 514—one or the other. I’m going to watch out for him, see. I’m going to keep my eye on him. What’s the matter?”

Mr. Croocrab choked.

“314?”

“Is that where he is?” asked Mr. Philibus.

“That’s where the dark guy with the scar’s just been in to scare the wits out of him!”

“No!” cried Mr. Philibus. “Is it possible? Poor little fellow! He’ll think I’m putting one over on him. How did you know?”

“Got a note. From a lady, I guess!” said Mr. Croocrab. “Tipped me off to go to 314. There’s something,” he declared intelligently, “fishy about this!”

Mr. Philibus threw up his hands.

“Fishy! It beats Hannah! The place must be full of crooks. Look here,” he said eagerly. “Can I help you? I’ve laid eyes on this dark chap with the scar, and, after all, there’s a thousand in it for some one.”

Mr. Croocrab nodded hesitantly. He was seeing the little blonde below stepping with him to the altar, and he didn’t like the idea of a fifty-fifty split with this chap. However——

“All right!” he said. “What had we better do first?”

“That’s for you to say,” said Mr. Philibus graciously, conceding Mr. Croocrab’s professional status. “But I feel I ought to look up little Mr. Blaine in 314 and apologize or something. What a thing to happen!”

“I’ll go with you!” said Mr. Croocrab.

“Do you suppose Grewgerry’s putting one over or anything?” asked Mr.

Philibus. "I don't trust that man! Even that reward. I'd like to see the color of his money."

"That," agreed the detective, his eyes gleaming, "ain't so bad an idea either! He's a slick guy, all right."

Mr. Grewgerry and his companions, having been left at the table by Mr. Blaine at the moment when the latter was ready for the plucking, had their moment of nervousness. The idea that anybody in this world, save those seeking a victim, should want little Mr. Blaine was preposterous. Their eyes, at first concentrated dismally on the dotted line still lacking the signature of Mr. Blaine, were raised at last in speculative inquiry.

"He'll be back!" said Grewgerry.

But, uncomfortably, they watched the door. "We'll go and see," he added at last. They searched the lobby. They made inquiries of a clerk. "Why, yes, sir. Mr. Blaine has gone up to his room!"

"Room?" repeated Mr. Grewgerry, his brows agitated. "His room? Why, he's stopping at——"

"He has just booked here. Mr. Blaine is in 314, sir. Front! Boy, show these gentlemen to 314!"

Little Mr. Blaine was still undergoing severe palpitations of the heart when his visitors were announced. He regarded them as a man might creatures of his past suddenly summoned up. Mr. Grewgerry, with his acute perception, leaped at once to the only logical conclusion.

"Mr. Blaine. I am sorry. You are ill. You have been taken ill. You have had to take a room!"

"Ill?" Mr. Blaine grasped at the word. It expressed so many things he felt; at remembrance of his terrible experience, at sight of these men who would have his signature for his and Martha's money.

"Do sit down!" urged Mr. Grewgerry blandly. "Is it your heart, Mr. Blaine?"

Mr. Blaine gulped, and spoke the first words that occurred.

"I have been held up!"

"Held up?"

"A man. A terrible criminal. In my window!" Mr. Blaine waved an arm

feebly. “A dark man with a scar on his face!”

Grewgerry leaped to his feet.

“What?” he roared. “Tell me, where is he? Where did he go?”

A voice spoke from the doorway; none had heard a quick preliminary knock, nor the opening of the door.

“He came up the fire escape and in my window!” said Mr. Philibus calmly. “Hello, Mr. Grewgerry. I think you’re likely at any time to have to turn over that thousand-dollar reward!”

“I’d give it gladly,” roared Mr. Grewgerry, facing the intruders fiercely, “to lay hands on that fellow!”

“Cash?” asked Mr. Philibus mildly.

“Cash!” roared Mr. Grewgerry.

“There’s danger in it,” said Mr. Philibus. “I’d like to see the color of the money before I risked my neck on fire escapes, and perhaps get plugged. Eh, Croocrab?”

The house detective’s face brightened.

“Sure. That’s only fair, Mr. Grewgerry. If you really mean to put this up ——” He rubbed his hands a little. He felt it would be inspiring to see the actual thousand before undertaking further action. Mr. Croocrab had a great respect for his own skin.

Grewgerry glared.

“You don’t trust me, eh? All right, Graham, lemme your pen. I’ll write a check. They’ll cash it for me below. The office know me well enough!”

The office, indeed, proved obliging. Mr. Grewgerry returned to display a thick pile of twenties and tens that made Mr. Croocrab’s head swim.

“There’s one thing we mustn’t forget,” suggested Mr. Philibus gently. “I’m not a prophet or the son of one, but I’ll wager my last shirt to a decayed onion that crook isn’t far off yet, Mr. Grewgerry. I shouldn’t be surprised if he’s looking at that wad of yours right now, sir! By Jove, I was sure I saw him—just now—at the window!” Mr. Philibus was both excited and truthful, having caught his own reflection there.

Every one, with instant accord, looked toward that window in which the wanted man had come. The darkness held a brooding and sinister suggestion of evil. Little Mr. Blaine made throaty cries of alarm.

“Let him just try and get it!” snapped Grewgerry. “I only ask the chance to try conclusions with him again!”

“And I’m here,” supplemented Mr. Croocrab with due modesty. “That guy don’t put nothin’ over me while I’m alive and in my right mind. No, sir!”

Mr. Philibus coughed slightly behind his hand. He remained for a moment gravely in thought.

“Suppose,” he said slowly, “I ask your advice, Mr. Croocrab. Suppose we were to bait the trap. If Mr. Grewgerry will risk his money for a short while with Mr. Blaine—you, of course, anticipate me, Mr. Croocrab!”

Mr. Croocrab felt flattered but dumb. Then the thing dawned on him.

He chuckled.

“That’s just my idea,” he said. “We’ll turn over this money to Mr. Blaine—or Mr. Grewgerry will, as if it was a business deal—see—and then Mr. Grewgerry follows us out here into the hall. Mr. Blaine steps in here and counts the money careful and puts it in his pocket. If that don’t bring the rat out of his hole, I’m a dumb-bell!”

Mr. Grewgerry was ready for any expedient.

Little Mr. Blaine made bleating sounds, but, a bit like a man in a dream, accepted the money with trembling fingers, and, as they left him, sat staring at it like a wooden Indian.

“Now I,” said Mr. Philibus thoughtfully, “had better go back to bed. The fellow came through my window before, and he may again. I better give no indication anything has happened. I’ll just lie there peacefully again, with the window open. Croocrab, you might post somebody outside my door, in case I need help. I’ll lock the door, as he might try to use my room as an escape again, but it might be as well to have reënforcements outside! Say a boy who could summon help from you below!”

“Sure,” said Croocrab. “I’ll put a bell hop on it!”

Mr. Philibus nodded.

“They say lightning never strikes twice in the same place, but this chap’s a bold, bad un, or I miss my guess, and it’s as well we should be prepared!”

“Shouldn’t we have some one watching on the fire escape?” said the detective.

Mr. Philibus looked at him in patient reproach.

“If I were a crook,” he said simply, “I’d postpone operations if somebody was sitting waiting to pinch me on the fire escape.”

“Something in that!” agreed Mr. Croocrab quickly. “Well, we’ll be all set for the first sign of alarm from Mr. Blaine! Right outside his door we’ll be!”

Once inside his room, Mr. Philibus, crawling for a moment into bed, as if in support of the cause of truth and honesty, slipped presently out the far side and over his pajamas drew on an old pair of trousers, a coat and a muffler to protect his neck. Standing for a moment before his mirror, he performed an operation that a lightning-change artist—and, indeed, he was one—might envy.

A few mysterious passes with his hands, on the tips of whose fingers was a preparation of his own perfecting, made him sallow looking; a similar additional operation provided lines to his face that lent a gauntness, and a final one gave the similitude of a scar across his right cheek bone. Taking from a carefully locked but unobtrusive and rather battered suit case a hat with wig attached, he pulled it on his head and became in every sense a dark and rather sinister person.

All this had been a matter almost more of seconds than minutes; pulling on a pair of old boots over socks into which the ends of his genteel pajamas were thrust, he moved softly to the window; the bell hop might have sharp ears; there was, fortunately, no keyhole aperture for the fellow to be curious with; then he stepped onto the fire escape.

The night was graciously dark now; he maneuvered with care and arrived outside 314.

Peering through the lighted window, he could see little Mr. Blaine sitting like a rabbit paralyzed by impending danger. The ears of the little man fairly stood up, and his hair seemed on the verge of declaring a sympathetic uprising. In his hands, clutched tightly, as if it were stage money, and he a novice upon whom the curtain had gone up unexpectedly, was that fat wad of tens and twenties. One thousand dollars—Mr. Josiah J. Grewgerry’s promised reward for the apprehension of a dark gentleman with a scar!

Mr. Philibus, feeling a certain tenderness toward little Mr. Blaine, hesitated in his course, then, thinking of the widows and orphans, the gentle souls of every sex who had suffered to provide themselves with handsomely engraved and worthless certificates for oil shares and Mr. Grewgerry and his associates with this thousand, he girded himself, and, stooping, picked up a “stage prop”

he had previously planted conveniently to hand under the window on the fire escape.

Little Mr. Blaine, wondering why he had ever left Martha and embarked on this city venture, conscious of the wad of bills in his hand, conscious of the support of the men who waited outside the door, was still more, and in fact supremely conscious of that window. His gaze was riveted on it.

His tongue explored the length of his dry lips. And, suddenly, his tongue seemed to get stuck, hard and fast between his lips.

On the end of a thin stick of sorts propelled by an unseen hand, a largish oblong of cardboard had appeared. It said:

SILENCE
and
YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED

Mr. Blaine's mind compassed all the events of an innocent life in a moment of time; he thought of how he had said nasty things to Martha about her married sister, and how once he had thrown shoes at a neighbor's cat, and he decided to cling to life. He stared with horror at the slow, cautious entrance of a dark man with a scarred cheek. This second sight of him was no more pleasing than the first. He was coming nearer. It was too much for Mr. Blaine. His mouth opened to make outcry; instead, some black wave smote the back of his neck and, the bank notes drifting from him to the floor, Mr. Blaine for the second time fainted dead away.

Mr. Philibus, stooping to pick up the bills, hesitated. It was easy now. Too easy! He had counted on an alarm at the least; it was desirable that others besides little Mr. Blaine should see and recognize the criminal!

Mr. Philibus looked up sharply. And, suddenly, reaching out an arm to the table near by, he swept from it the small bronze statue of a lightly clad lady bearing aloft a lighted torch. She lit on the floor, with a report just like a revolver shot.

Instantly the door burst open. Mr. Croocrab, scenting both danger and a thousand dollars, led the van, but cautiously, revolver in hand.

“There he is!”

The shout came from four throats simultaneously.

The dark gentleman with the scar regarded them mockingly from the window, his head within but his body safely outside.

“Shoot!” cried Grewgerry. “Dead or alive!”

The window came down with a crash, putting only the insecurity of a pane between Mr. Philibus and his antagonists. Mr. Croocrab’s revolver went up, but, before he could discipline a hand agitated by a brain swimming with thousand-dollar agitations, the pane was shattered from the outside, and through the jagged aperture came a mocking laugh.

Croocrab shot forward, Grewgerry at his heels.

“Mind the glass!” shouted Mr. Croocrab. “Oh, the devil! Stand back!”

Reaching out, he thrust the window up, springing from a further shower of splinters, cursing with emphatic protestation at a cut in his wrist. Next moment he was out upon the fire escape.

“Got away!” he moaned. “That fellow’s room! Maybe he’s gone that way again!”

With Grewgerry following, he shot up the escape, and in the open window of 414.

“Hello!” cried a sleepy voice from the bed. “What the——”

“The man with the scar!” cried Croocrab. “He didn’t come in here?”

Mr. Philibus stared, blinking sleepily.

“I’d have known if he did!” he said, grinning.

Suddenly, Josiah J. Grewgerry—who as the world knew to its sorrow—was no fool, cried:

“I believe you——”

He did not complete the remark. Dashing to the bed, he threw back the clothes.

“I say!” protested Mr. Philibus.

Mr. Grewgerry drew back, abashed. Mr. Philibus’ stout body was displayed only in futuristic pajamas. He appealed to Mr. Croocrab: “What’s biting our friend here?”

“Dunno!” said the house detective blankly. He reproached Mr. Grewgerry. “You know, sir, it don’t do to disturb hotel guests that way!”

“For two cents, sir,” added Mr. Philibus now blinking himself properly awake, as any one could see, “I’d bash in your other eye. By the by, where’s little Mr. Blaine? Have you left him to the mercy of this crook?”

Gently, Mr. Croocrab explained.

Mr. Philibus clucked a sympathetic tongue.

“Fainted? Well, now. And Mr. Grewgerry’s thousand dollars gone. A nice name this hotel will get, Mr. Croocrab, if this kind of thing gets about. If I were you, I’d get Mr. Blaine packed off home. It’s no kind of a place for him anyway—not with so many crooks around!”

“So many?” Mr. Croocrab was blank again.

“I saved Mr. Blaine from one already to-night,” said Mr. Philibus placidly. “I got him away about the time he was going to sign his poor little legacy away for nonexistent oil. It was I, as he will, no doubt, tell you when you question him, who suggested he take a room here and go at this matter quietly. So you see,” said Mr. Philibus humbly, “I feel quite guilty about what happened to him afterward!” He turned to Mr. Grewgerry, who had halted in his investigation of the room to absorb this last comment. “Is the gentleman looking for something?”

Mr. Grewgerry drew nearer the bed, and swore in an ungentlemanly fashion.

“I believe you’re a crook,” he began, but Mr. Philibus interrupted.

“I *know* you’re one!” he said gently. “I don’t like anything about you. I don’t like your face. I don’t like your morals. I don’t like your long nose. I don’t like your bald head. I don’t like the way you come in disturbing a gentleman’s sleep. In fact, let me warn you that, unless Mr. Croocrab takes you away, something nasty might happen to you. I can stand so much—and no more! Get out now! Go and find your thousand-dollar crook! I wouldn’t raise a hand any more to help catch him—for you! Not a finger! Get out! I’m sleepy. And if you try to trick little Blaine with any of your slick work, I won’t answer for myself. Get out of here!”

Mr. Grewgerry, mumbling things not nice for a gentleman’s ears, withdrew together with Mr. Croocrab.

“Woof!” said Mr. Philibus softly.

Mr. Grewgerry swung around, decided he had imagined something, and, before Mr. Philibus’ baleful glance, retired, closing the door. For a long time Mr. Philibus lay staring up at the ceiling and chuckling a little to himself.

Then, making sure that no one was at the window or on the fire escape, he drew from under the mattress a coat and pair of trousers, and a hat with wig attached.

“Ruined, I’m afraid!” he said dolefully, regarding the latter. “Ah, well! Lucky,” he said, “old nose didn’t look too far! Hadn’t time to clean the basin up!” He went over now and took from water—still warm—standing in the basin, a wash cloth, carefully rinsing from it a dusky look that clung to it, and some stains that might easily have come from the removal of an artificial scar.

“Quick work, old boy!” approved Mr. Philibus, gazing in his mirror. “But worth it in more ways than this!”

He took from the pocket of the discarded trousers a fat wad of bills in tens and twenties.

“It’s not robbery!” he said. “It’s a reward. He offered it for the chance to get his hands on this awful crook who bashed him up before! But what a pity I couldn’t have closed the other eye for him. Ah, well!”

Taking the money with him, he climbed into bed, shut off the night light that was burning, and pleasantly anticipated the delights of that slumber.

“As the dear old blacksmith said,” murmured Mr. Philibus sleepily, “‘Something attempted, something done, has earned a night’s repose’!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Mr. Philibus--Thousand-Dollar Man* by Leslie Gordon Barnard]