

ONE ORDER OF BLINTZES, AND HOLD THE FLIMFLAM

ALIGHT rain was falling on the just and the unjust alike, and my cheeks glowed like twin pippins that February evening when I flung open the door of Cooper's Dairy Restaurant, on the lower East Side, and paused for breath. If my rosy flush suggested anticipation for the cuisine within, it was illusory; the operatic entrance and heaving bosom arose from overexertion. Dining at Cooper's demands a sprint along one of the most sinister crosstown blocks in New York—so fearsome, in fact, that it was chosen for a bloodcurdling sequence in the film "Taxi Driver," and he who would arrive with wallet and skin intact must be as fleet as the chamois. Except for the horns, knock wood, I was that chamois.

My quick survey of the interior was reassuring. A few somnolent patrons lingered at the Formica-topped tables, and, selecting the remotest—of the tables, that is; only a Rorschach could have evaluated the patrons—I spread my paperback against a hillock of seed rolls and prepared to consume my meal in peace. Everything boded well; the waiter's face wore its customary expression of gloomy martyrdom, the borscht had slopped over the bowl as tradition requires, and I settled down to the anthology of Simenon in the certitude that nothing on earth aids digestion like a velvety mixture of beets, sour cream, and murder.

Ten minutes into the mélange, the first streaks of dawn had silvered the windows of the Police Judiciaire on the Quai des Orfèvres, Maigret's brow was furrowed into corduroy over the strangulation of a prostitute in the Rue de Lappe, and naught but a telltale red smear remained where once was borscht. Then a deep, rather peremptory voice jerked me back into the present.

"Mind if I sit here, friend? They've closed the other section."

Had Maigret him-

self suddenly appeared in Cooper's and busted me for garrotting the *nymphe du pavé*, it would have surprised me less than the speaker. His corpulent figure was encased in a mink-collared overcoat set off by a midnight-blue homburg, and as he negligently drew off gray gloves and rested his malacca stick and alligator attaché case on a chair, I found my tongue with an effort.

"Er—no, of course not. I'm just boning up for my exam."

"Oh?" A hint of condescension tinged his paternal smile. "You're a student, are you?"

Too grizzled to masquerade as a rookie at the Police Academy, I opted for a safer identity. "Extension course at the New School," I said briefly, plucking a salt stengel from the bread basket. "Detective Fiction Since Edgar Allan Poe."

"Interesting," he commented. His smile broadened. "I suppose it's taught you a whole lot about the criminal mind?"

"I know plenty already," I said. "The business I'm in, Mac, you have

to be a pretty shrewd judge of human nature."

"And what is that?" he asked, twinkling down from Parnassus.

"Yard goods," I said. "You know, mill ends and remnants—me and my brother run a store on Fourteenth Street. Boy, do we skin those Porto Ricans!"

It could have been my imagination, but from where I sat I heard a muffled click. In a flash, the grand-seigneurial manner switched to a wet shine in the eyes which was pure larceny. As he leaned forward intently, he came into focus—J. Rufus Wallingford, urging me to become expansive.

"I guess you two do all right there."

"You can say that again." I hooked thumbs into armpits. "Got a split-level rancher in Great Neck that cost three-fifty big ones, a Caddy Seville, and a paid-up annuity worth four hundred grand. I could quit tomorrow, except I still enjoy raking it in."

Our waiter, arms akimbo and stony-faced, had forborne to interrupt, but now his impatience, like the borscht, bubbled over. "Please, we're not running here a retirement village. Did you decide?"

"Ah, yes, yes, I must order." My tablemate caught up the menu and scanned it with obvious incomprehension. "Protose steak . . . eggplant cutlets . . . I don't recognize any of these dishes. Is this some kind of ethnic place?"

"Well, sort of—they get a good many Albanians. Bring me an order of cheese blintzes and a glass tea."

"Cheese blintzes?" the stranger repeated doubtfully. "What are they?"

"Crêpes, dumplings. Little sachets of heartburn which lay on the stomach like lead. They come with blueberries and cherries if you prefer."

"Fine, fine. I'll have the same." His computer, plainly, was still calculating my net worth, which must have come up trumps, for he launched straightaway into the capework. "Sorry, I should have introduced



"It's his fortieth birthday. I'm looking for something natural."



myself. J. Willis Wainwright, vice-president of the Gripfast Mucilage Company, in Ashtabula."

"Jud Kluckhorn," I responded.

"A pleasure to meet you, sir. Say, I knew a Kluckhorn once—a fry cook at a lumber camp in Manitoba. Fritz Kluckhorn, a great fellow."

"No relation, but all us Kluckhorns are kooks. Ah-ha-ha."

"Ah-ha-ha. But to turn serious for a moment. You know, we do a lot of business in England, so I often see their newspapers. Are you familiar with the *London Times*? ... Too bad. They run some marvellous crime stories—just the kind you're studying. However, that's beside the point." He withdrew a folded clipping. "Have a peek at this article they printed the other day."

Headlined "SAUDI PAYS £8.8M FOR WILDENSTEIN COLLECTION," the account read, "The Wildenstein family collection of French furniture and works of art, considered by the art world more distinguished than that of Mentmore, has been acquired by a Saudi Arabian businessman, Mr. Akram Ojjeh, for 75m francs (£8.8 m). Last week it was announced that he had bought *The France*, the transatlantic liner, for 80m francs. He now

plans to combine his two purchases, exhibiting the 202 superb Wildenstein items on board *The France*, according to the Lebanese weekly, *As Sayad*. The liner will be anchored off the coast of Florida and probably run as an hotel. According to Reuter and Agence France-Presse, Mr. Ojjeh was born in Syria and became a naturalized Saudi citizen in 1950. His fortune appears to be based on his company, *Technique d'Avant Garde Finance*, hitherto noted for high quality prefabricated buildings. The company has had several very large contracts in Saudi Arabia and is believed to have connexions with the Royal Family."

"Like wow, man," I said, wide-eyed. "That's going to be some hotel. Maybe I'll take Bernice and the kids there someday instead of the Fountainbleau."

"Yes siree, and you'll be able to afford it!" Wainwright declared. "Why do I say that? I'll tell you why I say that. Because you're going to be one of the owners!"

I stared at him, incredulous. "I am?"

"Sure—right up there with the biggies." He cast a hurried glance about. "Better lower our voices—that waiter's snooping around. I can't go into the

fine points right now, but here's the action. Through a source I'm not at liberty to disclose, I've learned that this Saudi, this Akram Ojjeh, is underfinanced. He's in a sticky position—the banks are holding a lot of his paper."

"You don't say. Did they tell you?"

"Nobody has to. I'm in the mucilage business, man. Paper, mucilage, accountancy—it's all related."

"You mean one accountant tells another," I murmured craftily.

"I knew I couldn't keep anything from a sly fox like you. Now, you're a smart businessman, Kluckhorn. Given his situation, what would you do?"

I pondered. "Well, I'd take back the paper and print on it 'Fire Sale' in big letters. Then I'd hang up a bunch of schmattes outside our store on Fourteenth Street."

"God almighty, what's eating you?" Wainwright snapped. "This is a deal involving millions, not like that flytrap of yours." He quailed as my face darkened. "Er—excuse me, no disrespect intended. What I'm getting at is, several associates and I have formed a little syndicate to help Mr. Ojjeh out of his difficulties. Each of us is contributing a hundred and seventy-five



"I'm late, you're angry—we quarrel."

thousand dollars to the pot, in return for which we receive fifty-one per cent of the hotel stock. You follow?"

"Yes, but talk slower, I'm afraid I'll miss something. Do you think—I mean, if an outsider—" I swallowed and plunged ahead. "Is there room for just one more investor in the syndicate?"

"Well, I'd have to consult my partners in the consortium, naturally, but I think we might be able to squeeze you in. Time, however, is of the essence, so if I could have a small check as evidence of your good faith..."

"About how much did you figure?"

He sponged the trickle of saliva from his necktie. "Oh, the amount is academic—we'd put it in escrow until the formal agreement's signed. Say about half—ninety thousand dollars."

"Hmm, that's not chopped liver—Oops, did you hear that? I mentioned chopped liver in a dairy restaurant!"

"I heard it," he said shortly. "Well, what's the answer? Are you coming in? I have to cable Lausanne."

"Wait, don't rush me.... Ninety thousand dollars.... No, I'd like to talk it over with my brother first."

"Is that all?" His sudden gaiety was almost infectious. "Why don't we pop over and see him together?"

"Oh, we can't do that." I drew back. "He's in intensive care at Beth

Israel Hospital. He was freezing a bunion on his foot with dry ice. It burned a hole in the floor and he fell into the cellar."

Wainwright stared at me fixedly for a moment. "Would you mind just repeating that?"

"No, I couldn't bear to," I said decisively. "It's too painful. But I'll tell you what. You've been so generous that I'm going to squeeze *you* in on something. From time to time, I experience what are called reading reversals, and I had one a moment ago when you showed me that clipping."

"Look here, Kluckhorn," he began, inflating himself like a blowfish. "I fail to see what connection—"

"It'll dawn on you presently," I assured him. "Pray, examine the name of this Saudi gentleman you're be-friending—Akram Ojjeh. If you reverse it, as I did, you will get 'hejjo marka.' Substituting two letters and eliding one, it becomes 'hello mark,' and since 'mark' is the usual synonym in your calling for a chump or a pigeon, we obtain the answer to your proposal. Do you remember Texas Guinan's renowned salutation to customers at her night club, 'Hello, sucker!'?"

His face slowly turned ruddier—a phenomenon almost impossible to credit. "Are you by any chance—" he sputtered and then checked himself.

"Are you alleging that my associates and I are a pack of swindlers?"

"Hardly," I replied. "To do so would usurp the function of a district attorney. Besides, I question the collective term 'pack' that you employ. While eminently proper for hounds or wolves, would it not be more accurate to describe yourselves as a goniff of swindlers?"

"Listen, wise guy," he burst forth threateningly. "Don't play games with me!"

"Wainwright, be reasonable," I chided him. "One minute you're courting me to join your caper, the next you flatly reject me. Vacillation like that can mean only one thing—our brief love affair is over. I must ask you to leave this table."

For years, despite the assurances of popular fiction, I always doubted whether overwrought individuals

gave vent to their feelings with a frustrated "Bah!" and stormed out, but now it was confirmed. With a frustrated "Bah!," Wainwright snatched up his impedimenta and tore out of Cooper's like a shot off a shovel. Simultaneously, our waiter emerged from the kitchen juggling two plates and a glass of tea.

"Hoo ha!" he exclaimed, mystified. "Where's the other party? Did he lose his appetite?"

"No, his impetus, I'd say."

"Well, I'll look around under the tables," he promised. "Meantime, what about his blintzes? Could you eat them, too?"

I shook my head.

"Then maybe you'll take them with you?"

"O.K.," I agreed, "but don't wrap them. I'll need them as weapons on the run home."

That's the great thing about Cooper's. Between the food and the trip there and back, you may not survive. Still, you meet some very unusual people.

—S. J. PERELMAN

Shapp hurriedly called a news conference and characterized Kane's remarks as the "swan song of a dead duck."

—Pittsburgh Press.

Or a silly goose.