

THE PIGEON DROP

Tony parked the big black sedan just around the corner from the row of large fashionable apartment buildings on Wilshire Boulevard.

"Stay here, Johnny," he said, opening the door and sliding out. "I won't be over ten minutes, and don't take any wooden nickels."

Johnny lit a cigarette and settled back, thinking what a lucky guy he was to be taken in on a job with an old-time operator like Tony. But, ten minutes lengthened into fifteen and then twenty and Johnny opened the door and stepped out onto the parkway. Might as well stretch out. San Francisco was a long ride, almost five hundred miles to make before morning.

Johnny walked a few paces onto Wilshire and leaned his back against a palm tree, his hat pulled low to shade his face from the beam of the nearby lamp post. A well-dressed, portly little man approached; at least he was well-dressed by Los Angeles standards. Here, thought Johnny, anything goes! A guy in shorts can be leading around a doll in a mink coat. As the man was almost even with Johnny, he leaned down and picked something off the walk.

"Lose anything?" he asked.

Johnny grunted a "nope", and the man stopped near the lamp post.

"Guess we found something."

Johnny could no longer contain his curiosity and joined the man peering at the ring he held up to the light. It was a lady's ring with a green stone in the center surrounded by a circle of white stones. Several thoughts ran through Johnny's head. Maybe I should say it's mine and that I just dropped it, but, no, I had said I didn't lose anything. I could clip him one and just take it -- but then I would gum

up the deal with Tony!

The well-dressed gentleman interrupted his thoughts. "Looks like this may be valuable. Could be worth a thousand dollars - if it's genuine. The owner would, no doubt, pay a substantial reward for its return. Tell you what. Suppose we both take a chance. I will give you twenty dollars and keep the ring or you can give me twenty dollars and you keep the ring. If it is valuable, it will be a good bet -- ~~but if not, one of us will be out only twenty dollars.~~ What do you say?"

Johnny did some rapid calculation. If the ring was genuine, he had no idea of returning it to its owner for a reward, not if it was worth a thousand dollars. If it was a phoney, he was only out twenty dollars. A fifty to one shot -- or better. He grabbed the ring and reached into his pocket.

"I'll take it. Here's your twenty."

"Good," said the man. "Hope you make a profitable deal." He carefully placed the twenty in his Billford and continued down Wilshire.

Johnny was elated. He could hardly wait to tell Tony and have Tony congratulate him for making such a quick decision. Then he saw Tony coming down the steps from the apartment house. Approaching with a quick but unhurried stride. Johnny could not help but admire him. Gee, if it had been me that had just knocked over a dump, I'd run like hell and out the back. But, of course, Tony was right. Raised no suspicions this way.

Tony looked up quickly. "What are you doing out here?" he growled.

Johnny shrugged. "Just stretching my legs."

They turned the corner and Tony opened the door to the right of the driver. "You wheel this hack. I want to take a little snooze."

Johnny got in under the wheel, started the motor, and they were off.

Johnny could contain himself no longer. "How'd you do, Tony? Everything O. K.?"

"Of course," replied Tony. "Haven't I been casing this joint and this old dame for the last two weeks? It was a cinch. I knew there'd be a safe and it would be easy. Any rich old gal that wears rocks like hers always keeps 'em in a safe. Here, kid, look at there."

~~Tony casually took out from his coat pocket a large handful of~~ jewelry. Johnny could see several diamond rings with fancy mountings, a necklace, bracelets, and other pieces of jewelry.

"What'll they bring us? Any idea?"

Tony pursed his lips. "Oh, ten or twelve grand for a quick turnover in Frisco -- with my connections, that is. The next job we go on, kid, I'll give you a lesson on how to open a box. Of course, this little old wall safe was a pushover."

Johnny turned on the radio and centered his attention on the highway. Tony settled back complacently with his eyes closed, listening to the music of a dance orchestra.

Maybe I should tell Tony now about the ring, thought Johnny. Maybe it's phoney and he'll laugh at me. He looked again and Tony was asleep.

The big car almost noiselessly ate up the miles and several hours later Tony stirred restlessly. "Hey, kid, let's stop and have some coffee. You getting tired or sleepy?"

"No, Tony," Johnny said, "but I sure could use a cup of coffee."

Some fifteen or twenty minutes later he pulled into an all-night filling station and restaurant that specialized in serving the trucks that abounded on the highway connecting the two California cities.

When they were comfortably seated at a small table and had lighted

cigarettes, Johnny could restrain himself no longer.

"Say, Tony, you know while I was waiting for you, a funny thing happened. An old guy came walking down Wilshire and picked up a ring, right in front of me." Johnny took the ring out of his pocket and handed it to Tony. "Is it any good?"

"How did you get it?" Tony asked suspiciously. "No rough stuff?"

"No, Tony. You think I'm a fool." Johnny answered in a hurt voice. "I sorta bought it from him."

"Wait a minute, kid. Don't tell me you fell for that old one!" Tony giggled. "A nice looking well-dressed man and he picked it up right in front of you. Only you didn't really see him pick it up because he didn't. And then he says, 'Look what we found!' And then he says he'll be very fair about the whole thing. He'll give you five dollars and keep the ring or you give him five dollars and you keep it on account of he can't tell if it's real or not and, of course, you think it's worth several hundred bucks and you give him five hard earned dollars for a ring he paid fifty cents for at the five and ten."

Johnny grinned sickly. "I gave him twenty. He said it might be worth a thousand."

"Oh, no, kid!" Tony laughed uproariously. "Don't tell me you fell for the old 'pigeon drop'. Well, I'll be darned. Haven't even heard of it being worked in years -- and they had to get you. Come on boy, let's move. We've got to get to Frisco."

Tony was still laughing as they got in the car. "Well, well. My partner goes for the 'pigeon drop'. I've heard everything."

The radio started again as the ignition was turned on and they resumed their journey.

"Kid, don't you get tired of that damned music?"

"Nah," Johnny grunted. "Might cheer me up. Guess I got plenty to learn, ain't I, Tony. You want this ring? It's kinda pretty. Maria might like it."

"That junk!" Tony sneered. "Maria's been around me too long not to be able to spot phoney jewelry. You keep it, kid -- for a souvenir."

Johnny looked at the ring ruefully, then tossed it out the window.

Tony laughed contemptuously. "There goes twenty bucks, kid, but it's a cheap price for lesson number one."

They drove for several hours more, stopping only once for gas and oil. Before long the sun peeked over the hills to the east and not too long thereafter Johnny snapped on the radio.

"May be some news. It's almost six."

"Yeah," said Tony, half asleep. "Hear anything on our job, wake me."

Several minutes later the announcer reported, "and now, folks, the six o'clock addition of the latest news -- happenings here in Los Angeles." There followed the usual report of automobile accidents, with the attendant loss of lives that Los Angeles, having almost three deaths a day, seems unable to curb. "And now," continued the announcer, "The police report that Mrs. Frank Haywood, 7810 Wilshire Boulevard, lost an emerald and diamond ring last evening somewhere near the intersection of Elm Drive and Wilshire. Mr. Hayward valued the ring in excess of twenty five hundred dollars."

Johnny gulped and turned speechlessly to Tony. Tony quivered and sat up straight.

"And in the same neighborhood," the announcer went on, "the apartment of Mrs. Mattie Howard, widow of J. T. Howard, the film magnate, was burglarized last night between the hours of eight P. M. and midnight. Police report that Mrs. Howard's wall safe was forced open

and its contents taken. Fortunately, Mrs. Howard was wearing her very valuable collection of gems and the unwitting thieves took only seven or eight pieces of costume jewelry."