

GUILTY

DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

Vol. 6 — No. 1

September, 1961

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W. W. Scott — Editor

GUILTY DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE is published quarterly by Feature Publications Inc., at 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial office at 32 West 22nd St., New York 10, N. Y. Second class postage paid at the post office at Holyoke, Mass., August 20, 1956, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy 35c. Subscription rates, \$4.00 for 12 issues. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts; and all such material must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All stories printed in the magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is coincidental. Copyright 1961 by Feature Publications, Inc. All rights, including translation, reserved under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in the U. S. A.

DEATH CAN BE BEAUTIFUL

by RUSSELL THOMPSON

Mark had a nice neat little racket. It concerned death

MARK Prentice remained on the stage until the small auditorium was empty, watching the suckers leave. He wore a benevolent smile, but if anyone had been close enough to see his eyes, they would have

been startled by the look of contempt in them.

There had only been a couple of dozen in the audience, but that was usually enough for his purposes. Only certain kinds of people attended his lectures,



and out of those few there would be some who would get in touch with him later. He was satisfied to see that about six of his listeners had thought enough of his pitch to pick up one of the cheap booklets on the table near the exit, and to put a buck in the collection box. The percentage was right. If things went according to plan, one or two of them should be calling him at his hotel the next day.

The idea was all his, and he was proud of it. When the calls for his magic act got fewer and fewer, Mark began to think hard of other ways to use his talents as a magician. Not only was the hand quicker than the eye, but he could talk faster than people could think.

Part of his act had been a sort of seance on a dark stage, with bells and trumpets flying through the air, a table walking across the stage on two legs, and ghostly faces appearing and disappearing in the middle of the air.

He got the idea at the last stage performance he ever put on, when an old woman in the audience jumped up and screamed that one of the 'faces'

belonged to her dear, departed husband. After the show was over, she came backstage and begged him to 'contact' her husband for her at a private sitting in her home, and offered to pay him well. He had to turn down the offer, but it got him to thinking.

So, Mark the Magician vanished from sight after the act folded. Not long after, 'Professor' Prentice began to tour medium-sized towns in the mid-West. Often, he used a phony name.

Sometimes he had a beard and a mustache, or dyed his hair, or wore tinted glasses, until he crossed the border into another state and started all over again. Whether he disguised himself or not depended on how rough a deal his latest 'client' got from him.

In the last caper, for example, in another state, he had even managed to get away with the old "pigeon drop," where he convinced a woolly-brained old lady that he could help her materialize a small fortune—but first she had to turn over her savings to him so he could 'meditate' on it, while she held the thought. While she was

holding the thought, he packed up in the middle of the night and did a disappearing act.

Usually, though, he managed to make a good living from charging for his services. He had worked out a routine. He looked for towns that were big enough to have at least a weekly newspaper, a public library, and a small auditorium or an empty store that he could rent for a night.

Before he did that, though, he would use the reading room of the public library, looking just like any other citizen with time on his hands. He would get several back issues of the town's newspaper, not too old and not too recent. Then he would read the obituary columns carefully and take down notes.

It was amazing what you could learn about the deceased and their surviving relatives from a short notice. He would add to his knowledge by casing the joint where the departed one used to live, and watching to see who went in and out.

A week or so later, he would make his grand entrance into town. He would pay some kid to leave handbills at the front

doors of homes in the better part of town, then wait for the suckers to appear at his meeting on the following night. He always gave the same lecture on the Beyond, and the ones who fell the hardest for the pitch would always pay out a dollar for a copy of the little book with the so-called spirit-photographs, reproduced from old standard books on ghosts and mediums. His current address was always typed at the bottom of the front cover.

He could almost always count on getting a call next day—a call from somebody in mourning, begging him for a private interview.

Mark Prentice thought of himself as a sort of traveling ghoul, and got a big kick out of it. His conscience never bothered him, because he believed in never giving a sucker an even break.

As for the local cops, even when they got curious about him, they were no problem. After all, he was just giving a public, free lecture on the Beyond, not telling fortunes. And if some private citizen chose to call him in for a private sitting or a comforting talk in their

home—why, it was nobody's business but theirs.

He always got it across to the customer, delicately but firmly, that his time was precious, and that he counted on loving gifts from his clients to make a living—just so that he could go on spreading his message of hope, of course. Once he got inside somebody's home, he would warn the sucker not to tell anyone else about what went on. Some unbeliever might destroy their faith and prevent contact with the loved one.

Then he would hold the seance in a room with one candle for light, and pretend to go into a trance. With his training as a stage magician it was easy to make knocks come out of a table, or to make the table seem to rise by itself while his hands were on top, in full sight. Or he would use a ouija board, and tell things he had learned or guessed from the old obituary and other sources.

The poor dopes were so amazed and happy at getting a message from Beyond that they tripped over themselves to press money into his hands. They implored him to come back—and he did, again and again, until

he figured that the cow was milked dry. Then he moved on fast, and never left a forwarding address.

Mark Prentice liked his profession. The hours were short, the work easy, and the pay pretty good. Every so often, when he was really in the money, he gave himself a vacation. He would drop the "professor" act and hit some big city, where he would rent a fancy new car and make like a traveling salesman with a generous expense account.

He would turn on the charm—and flash an impressive roll of bills—in some swank bar, and before it closed up some dame with a classy chassis would be hanging on to his arm to make sure he didn't get away from her.

Yes, Mark thought, life can be beautiful. Or maybe it should be (and he chuckled at his own joke), "death can be beautiful"—as long as it was someone else's.

SO, he gave his prepared pitch in dear old Oakville on Sunday night, as usual. Sunday night seemed to give the whole

setup an air of respectability and reverence. Sometimes he almost felt like a preacher up there on the platform.

He spent the whole of Monday in his hotel room, passing the time by practicing sleight-of-hand in order to keep himself in top form. He had solemnly warned the desk clerk not to put through any telephone calls until evening, to tell callers that the "Professor" was in meditation. He knew that would impress the suckers so much that they could hardly wait until it got dark so that they could start calling up again.

Mark had dinner in his room. Then, at seven o'clock, he called the desk clerk, sounding as if he was doing the whole town a favor, and said he was ready to take calls.

In order to get numb enough to talk to the local yokels without the feeling that he wanted to puke at their whining and begging, he downed exactly two straight shots of vodka from the bottle hidden in the bottom of his trunk. Then he chewed on a piece of chlorophyll gum, just in case he got an early appointment for that night.

He didn't have long to wait. The telephone began to ring about five minutes after he gave the glad tidings to the stupid desk clerk. He picked up the receiver and announced himself in his deepest, most cultured tone of voice. He also managed to sound sympathetic and comforting at the same time.

The voice at the other end was that of an older woman. She beat around the bush, until Mark gently coaxed her into coming to the point. She said that she and her sister had heard his talk and read his book on the Beyond, and they were terribly interested in his message.

Mark frowned, because he could still detect a sort of hesitation or nervousness. But then, a lot of people were like that the first time, so he used his best sales talk and got the old girl around to asking him to come out to the house that night, in such a way that she thought it was her own idea.

When he finally got her off the line, Mark consulted his little notebook and smiled with satisfaction. It had been Hilda on the line—the older of the

two Dusenberry sisters. The younger one was named Tilda. Hilda and Tilda—now there was a pair, and both were spinners. It seemed that their big brother Sam had passed to his reward a month ago, leaving them alone in the big house.

Mark had already cased it. It was really outside the town limits, set way back on a big lot and hidden behind trees and walls, and reached only by a dirt road that branched off from the highway. Still, it looked as though the family that had built it once knew what real money was—and there might be enough still left for the taking.

He put on his dark blue suit and black tie, and the thin rimless glasses, and practiced in front of the mirror until he found just the right expression—a sort of cross between a preacher and a family physician. Picking up his large, professional-looking briefcase, he left the hotel and got into the modest but clean-looking second-hand car he used for these occasions. He always tried to look respectable without looking like he made money.

It was completely dark by

the time he set out, but he remembered where to turn off the highway and just how far to drive up the dirt road to the big house. When he saw the yellow light glimmering through the trees, he turned on to the winding driveway until he came to the front steps, stopped and got out. The sisters must have been looking out of one of the heavily curtained windows, because the front door opened as soon as his foot touched the top step.

A tall, thin, grey-haired woman stood in the light of the vestibule. Mark remembered her as one of the suckers who came to his talk the night before. "I'm Hilda Dusenberry," she said. It was the voice he had heard earlier over the telephone. He bowed his head solemnly, stepping inside as she opened the door wider and stood aside for him.

He waited while she bolted the door, then followed her through dim, musty halls until they came to a big room that used to be called a parlor in older times. A smaller, plumper woman was sitting in a rocking chair, but she got to her feet as Prentice entered.

"Tilda," the older sister announced, "Reverend Prentice is here." The plump one did a sort of curtsy and mumbled something. Mark Prentice chuckled tolerantly and wagged one finger at them.

"No, no, dear ladies. It's not Reverend Prentice—just plain Professor Prentice, as I said before. I regret that I am not a man of the cloth, although I do have a calling and a message—a message of comfort for the bereaved." He put the tips of his fingers together in a pious gesture, and watched the hopeful expressions on their faces through lowered eyelids.

THEN Tilda finally found her wits and invited him to sit down in a hard, uncomfortable chair. Hilda bounced off to a remote corner of the house that must have been the kitchen, because she returned in a few minutes with a tray of cookies and iced ea. Mark hid his distaste and forced down two cookies and half a glass of iced tea while the two women stared at him.

"That was delicious," he lied, wiping his lips delicately with a napkin. "But now let us see

if there is a contact here." He closed his eyes for a moment, then said: "I sense the presence of Sam Dusenberry—yes—that is his name. He is very close to you—he is—he is your brother!" He opened his eyes to see what effect he had created, and almost laughed at the look on their faces. It was as if he had just told them the biggest secret in the world.

"Oh, yes, yes," Tilda sighed.

"My goodness," Hilda gasped.

As a matter of fact, Mark thought, they even looked a little scared. But that wasn't really too unusual, even in people who were anxious to contact their dear departed. So he thought no more of it. . .

"Perhaps he has a message for his beloved sister," Mark added, and opened the briefcase and took out the ouija board and set it up on the table at his elbow. He put his fingertips on the indicator. "Does either of you ladies have a question for the soul who has passed Beyond?" Through his slitted eyes, he could see the sisters exchanging scared looks.

Then Tilda spoke up, her voice a little shaky and hesi-

tant. "You might—you might ask him—ask Sam, I mean. If—if he wants to tell us—about the money. Yes—ask him about the money. . . ."

Mark's ears pricked up at the mention of money, but he kept his face calm and his eyes closed. He began to think furiously. Since old Sam had no other relatives than his two spinster sisters, everything had been left to them. Then why the question about money?

Could it be that they wanted dear Sam's advice on how to invest it, perhaps? But he quickly rejected the idea. The question wasn't phrased as if they wanted advice—although he wished he could con them into some "investment" that would route the money into his greedy hands.

No, he reasoned, it wasn't that. It sounded more like they had expected to inherit more money than they actually got from the estate. He recalled that often an old-timer didn't trust banks completely, and liked to put aside cash in some private hiding place—and kept it a secret even though they knew they couldn't take it with them.

He remembered a story about an old beggar who died, and left thousands of dollars sewn up in the mattress of his bed. He decided to take a chance.

From long practice, Mark knew where every letter of the alphabet was on the ouija board. With his eyes shut tight, he moved the indicator around with his fingertips, spelling out a message slowly, letter by letter, so that they could follow it. He knew what they must be thinking—that Sam's spirit must be guiding his hands, since he couldn't see the board for himself.

The "message" was short, but it said that there was money hidden in the big old house. Then, Mark's hands slowed down, and stopped, as if the message was fading. He sighed and opened his eyes, and saw the sisters sitting on the edges of their chairs, looking at him with bright eyes.

"I'm so sorry, ladies," he said. "Your brother's spirit can tell us no more for a time. But perhaps I can help you. I am a sensitive, you see."

Tilda's eyes watered, and she smiled a sad little smile. "That

would be wonderful of you, Reverend—I mean, Professor Prentice.”

Mark looked down at his carefully manicured hands. “There is only one drawback,” he said regretfully. “My time is so limited, as you know. I have pressing engagements elsewhere...”

The sisters looked at each other, then Tilda spoke again. “If you help us find it, we would be very glad to give you a large donation—to aid you in carrying on your great work.”

Mark pursed his lips. “Perhaps—yes, it might just possibly be arranged. I shall have to send word ahead and cancel my next two or three lectures...” The women babbled at the same time, expressing their thanks for his great sacrifice, and again promised a generous donation to The Cause. Mark stood up, tall and dignified.

“Perhaps we could start tonight,” he suggested. “If you ladies would be so kind as to show me the house? I would like to feel the vibrations...”

They almost fell over each other in their eagerness to take him on the grand tour of the old house. They started with

the cellar, leading him down a long, steep flight of stairs. It was cold and damp down there. There were no windows. The floor and the walls were made of solid concrete. There didn’t seem to be a likely hiding place anywhere.

They took him through the rest of the house, while Mark memorized every room. He was already forming a tentative plan of coming back late at night when the sisters were asleep, in order to search the place for himself. If he found the money before they did, he would have it all for himself—not just a “donation.”

FINALLY, they completed the inspection of the house and came back to the parlor. The condition of some of the rooms showed that the greedy sisters had already done some searching on their own, but with no luck. But Mark was sure he could do better. He was a trained magician, familiar with all sorts of illusions and gimmicks.

He had formed some ideas about where the sly, suspicious old miser might have concealed a hoard of cash—but he wasn’t

telling the spinsters. So he just assured them that he felt money-vibrations in the house, and the greedy look on their pasty faces startled him.

He said he was too tired to go any further that night, but would return tomorrow. He didn't bother to mention that "tomorrow" meant the small hours of the morning, when they would be tucked in their beds.

Their gratitude knew no bounds. They insisted that he have a nightcap before he left. The offer surprised him, but he almost laughed when Tilda brought in another tray of cookies and cup of hot tea, and he realized that this was their idea of a nightcap. They insisted, and he wanted to keep them happy, so he managed to down some more of the stuff. Then he decided it was time to leave.

He was surprised to discover that he couldn't get out of the chair. He felt so relaxed. One of the sisters—it might have been either Hilda or Tilda—was asking him something. He had to concentrate to answer. No, he assured them, nobody knew that he had come out to see them that night—he re-

spected their grief and their privacy and would never expose them to the ridicule of unbelievers.

He said goodnight, and his mouth felt like it was full of cotton. He tried to get up, but was annoyed to find that his arms and legs refused to obey him. As a matter of fact, the next minute he felt like he had turned to wax, and slid from the chair to the floor. He lay on his back, his open eyes staring up at a ceiling that was going slowly around like the floor of a merry-go-round. He remembered the strong, bitter tea, and a terrible thought struck him. He managed to get out a strangled whisper.

"Poison," he croaked. "You poisoned me..."

"Gracious, no," one of the sisters protested. "We only drugged you a little."

The other sister added: "Just like that old skinflint, Sam, when he went for a drive and lost control of the car..."

Then he was aware that they were dragging him across the floor, puffing and panting. Then bumpety-bump on his spine, down the stairs to the basement where they left him

on the cold, damp stone. He heard the heavy door slammed shut at the top of the stairs, and then the sound of a bolt shoved home.

Mark didn't die. He recovered the next day, feeling as if he had the biggest hangover of all time. When his legs weren't so wobbly any more, he mounted the stairs and banged on the solid cellar door and shouted to be let out. In a few minutes somebody answered cautiously on the other side—it could have been Tilda or it could have been Hilda.

Whoever it was, she told him he would have to stay there until he could tell them just where the money was hidden. They were taking no chances on his leaving town for one of his important lecture engagements. And no, they would not let him out to help them search. No man could be trusted. He could tell them through the door, and when they found old Sam's money, they would let him go.

He tried to argue with them, telling them that he was just a fake. But of course they knew better—it was only an excuse

to get him out of his prison.

Later that day—or maybe it was the following day, as Mark lost track of time—he banged on the door and complained that he was hungry and thirsty. But they only scolded him like a bad little boy, saying that he would get nothing to eat or drink until he told them where the money was hidden.

Desperately, he began to make wild guesses, and he could hear them scurry off to look where he told them. Then, later, he would hear heavy steps approaching, and a shrill voice would come through the thick panelling, complaining that he was wrong—or else Sam's spirit was lying to him.

Mark's pitch had been too good this time, and he had found the perfect, completely believing suckers...

The sisters never gave in, and they never gave up trying, but they never did find old Sam's money.

And Professor Prentice never gave another lecture on the Beyond, although he learned all about it for himself...

THE END