

fantastic

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STOP ON THE RED

By **FRANKLIN GREGORY**

What goes on in newspaper offices? You think maybe the editor gets a hot tip, puts all the weight of his vast experience behind it and comes up with a front page yarn that cleans out City Hall?

No, sir!

The way it's really done is laid bare, for the first time, in the next few pages. Possibly the man in the white apron has exaggerated slightly; you know how barkeeps are on a slow night. But the story itself must be true. Franklin Gregory, who wrote it, was, as the saying goes, once a newspaperman himself . . . and we don't have to tell you what sticklers those boys are for the truth. But more than that, Mr. Gregory has twice traveled around the globe — and we don't mean the globe in the reading room of the New York Public Library!



Illustrator: Charles Berger

YES, SIR, I guess this is the only bar in the world with a traffic light on it. And since you've mentioned the subject, it's going to cost you an even buck. Right in that little slot at the top, my friend — and I know the boys will thank you. It's for the Al Ladd Pension Fund.

Another Manhattan? Okay, but I better warn you. This traffic light's showing green now, but any time I think you've had your limit, I switch her to red — like this, see? That way you know you aren't supposed to ask for any more and that you won't get it if you do ask, and that way neither one of us has any trouble.

Crazy? Well, that's what some of the boys thought when we first rigged her up. But you'd be surprised how well she keeps them in order. They're newspaper fellows,

you know. That's why they call this the Blue Pencil Club.

Who's Al Ladd? Now that's a fair question, since you've invested your money in him, and you being a stranger. Well, sir, Mr. Ladd is one of the finest, most generous newspapermen Philadelphia ever saw. There's not a member of this club, my friend, who at one time or another hasn't enjoyed a mighty big favor from him — a loan to tide him over, perhaps; maybe even his job. So now that the old gentleman is in what you might call personal distress . . . well, we have this fund. . . .

This light, now — Old Four-Square, he calls her — used to belong to Mr. Ladd. The city really owned her, I suppose, when she was perched up there by the old *Morning Post* Building on Broad Street, bossing six lanes of

traffic north and south and four lanes east and west. But if ever a man had a mistress . . .

You'll notice that I speak of her in the female gender. Mr. Ladd — he and I are closer than twins, you know — that's the way he likes it.

The time he brought her in here, for example, he says: "Joe . . ." Joe's the regular steward, but he's off today. Mr. Ladd says: "Joe, I guess the old girl's lost her virtue at last. I guess we all do," he says, and he sighs. "But if she can still show the light to some of these youngsters," he says, "there'll be use to her yet. So take care of her, Joe."

He'd just been let out as city editor of *The Morning Post*, you understand, and being along in years he couldn't get another steady job, though he does get in a day's work now and then, mostly around the club here. Anyway, that's why he spoke like he did. But it's a damn lie that he brought her in here as a sort of de luxe tin cup. There are some men who will do anything for a buck, but not Mr. Ladd.

Bringing her here was Joe's idea. Joe had known about her, of course, before. Mr. Ladd would drop in here for a nightcap after putting the paper to bed, and he'd talk about her. Only to Joe and a couple of the guys, of course.

The first time he mentioned her, he says in that quiet voice of his:

"Joe, people sure are crazy." And he goes on to tell how he can see this traffic light from his city room on the third floor. He says: "I'll swear that both the drivers and the pedestrians think she plays favorites against them, taking such a long time to make up her mind to turn from red to green. Why, some of those fool drivers even honk at her. But by golly, I put a stop watch on her tonight, and I'm bound she's the most impartial thing I ever saw. I wish my reporters were half as impartial as she is."

One night some reckless driver — "impatient and maybe out of spite," Mr. Ladd says — side-swiped the standard she was perched on.

"Joe," Mr. Ladd says, "that hurt me *here*." And he clutched his stomach.

And there was the time, too, when a cub reporter went off the beam in writing up some controversial story. Editorialized, you know. So Mr. Ladd leads this kid over to the window and points down to Old Four-Square and says: "Son, no good reporter ever plays favorites. You do just like that light does and give both sides."

And do you know, just three years later that youngster won a Pulitzer prize!

Up to about then, Mr. Ladd never saw anything in that traffic light except a symbol of a square

deal — a sort of lighthouse beacon, you might say, confirming the rightness of the way he did things. All the years he'd been with *The Morning Post* he'd been a fair-minded city editor of the old school. He had a mortal fear of libel, and if he was in doubt about a story, he'd spike it. And that's the way *The Post* was, too. Why, they used to call *The Morning Post* "The Daily Tombstone", and some of the wise guys even called Mr. Ladd "The Gravedigger".

But hell's bells, you have to admit that no newspaper — or newspaperman, either — ever gets anywhere by just plodding along doing the correct thing day after day. They both have to keep up with the times, and that means that if one paper has got a lot of zing and imagination and dishes out a lot of scandal, then the opposition has to get some bigger zing and dish out bigger scandal.

So finally the time came when *The Morning Post* started losing circulation, which means it started losing advertising, which means the owners started losing money. So they got together one day and called the editor and the managing editor and Mr. Ladd in on the carpet.

They said: "Gentlemen, to look at our paper you'd think we were back in the horse-and-buggy days. But, gentlemen, this is the atomic age, so let's splash some atomic

news over the front page. "Gentlemen," they said, "get out the big type and the red ink and the leg art and let's run stories with some zing." And they looked squarely at Mr. Ladd and said, "And if anybody on the staff hasn't the guts to do it, we'll find men who have."

You can see how that put poor Mr. Ladd on the spot, him being of the old school. Any newspaperman knows, of course, that in a city this size scandals come a dime a dozen. And you can always start a crusade at the drop of a hat — against sin, dope, the cops, grafters, or what have you. But the thing is: can you *prove* it when the chips are down? That's what always worried Mr. Ladd. He was just as anti-sin and pro-scandal as anybody, but he wanted to be fair, too, and like I say, he had that mortal fear of libel. So he started to sweat with worry.

It was a couple of weeks, maybe, after the new rules started, that Mr. Ladd, with the bulldog deadline behind him, went out for a bite to eat. The paper had been brightening up all right, just gory with red ink and big headlines. And they were running cheesecake on the front page and a couple pages of more girlie pictures inside. And they'd bought some new comics and features from a New York syndicate, and hired a couple of new rewrite men and feature writers who knew how to sling the

jazzy words. And instead of running the divorce actions on the obituary page like they used to, they slapped 'em on page one, too, even if it was only Annie Jones the five-and-dime girl who nobody ever heard of.

This night I'm talking of, Mr. Ladd had a real problem and it didn't make his digestion any better. The State cops had moved into town and raided a gambling joint where they found two City Councilmen and one of the town's biggest merchants shooting craps with Hangnail George, the big-time gambler. There was fifteen thousand bucks on the table, and the State cops took that for evidence and pinched Hangnail George and some small fry who were playing ten-cent ante at the next table, but they flagged the biggies.

Well, hell, it wasn't any news that Hangnail George and a handful of lousy punks had been pinched again. It was the Who's Who that was news. But they weren't booked, the State cops trying to protect them by failing to pinch them. And yet the reporter who turned in the story had the names and all, and Mr. Ladd knew he was thoroughly reliable and that his source was impeccable.

As if all this wasn't a big enough poser, the business man — it was R. Farthington Clancy III — was one of *The Morning Post's* biggest

advertisers, and the Councilman belonged to the Good Government Party which the paper was always thumping the drum for.

The whole mess outraged Mr. Ladd's sense of justice. He told Joe that the headline he really wanted to run, if he could run the story at all, was: "WHY THIS FAVORITISM? DOES MONEY TALK?"

Well, he finished his supper and he was standing outside on the street corner, still undecided what to do about this borderline story, and there was Old Four-Square perched up on her iron standard, and Mr. Ladd gave the standard a friendly pat just for old time's sake.

"And then, by Harry, I felt all my troubles go away," Mr. Ladd told Joe later that night when he came in for his nightcap. "I glanced up at her and she was showing green."

Mr. Ladd went back to the office knowing just what he was going to do. But somehow, he kept putting it off. He still wasn't quite sure that, from being a symbol, Old Four-Square had become an active guide. So he went to the window and looked down at Old Four again, and sure enough she's showing green again. All in all, he did this five-six times, and each time she showed green.

That convinced him. He marked the copy for the top of page one, put on the reporter's by-line and sent it over to the copy desk. I'll

tell you, Mr. Ladd was feeling pretty chipper that night when he came in here with a copy of the paper fresh off the press.

But he wasn't feeling so good the next afternoon when he showed up at the office. It was almost like he had a hangover. There was all hell going on. Mr. R. Farthington Clancy III had been raising Ned with the advertising manager, and the ad manager had lit into the editor and as soon as Mr. Ladd reached his desk the editor was there, too, barking about what was Mr. Ladd trying to do, sell the presses from under the paper? And what did he mean showing up members of *The Post's* own Good Government Party?

Mr. Ladd didn't say anything at first. He just ambled over to the window and stared down and there was Old Four-Square flashing a bright green.

"It sure perked me up," Mr. Ladd told Joe. He turned around and gave the editor hell right back. He said that when the owners told him to jazz up the paper, he took 'em at their word and, by golly, if they didn't like the way he jazzed it up they could get somebody else. He said that Mr. R. Farthington Clancy III was simply bluffing, that he couldn't afford *not* to advertise and let his competitors get an edge on him. And as for the Good Government Party, he said, they'd better

change their name if they couldn't put up better candidates for office than those two bums they had on City Council.

Then Mr. Ladd sat back and waited for the roof to cave in. But not a godforsaken thing happened. Nobody dared file a libel suit because the story — or at least Old Four Square — was right. And the next Friday Mr. Ladd found a fat bonus in his pay envelope.

I've known Mr. Ladd man and boy for a good many years, and I've never seen anybody change his character so. Mind you, I'm not saying that Mr. Ladd of the Old School, as you might say, was a better man than the Mr. Ladd of the New School. They were both decent, honorable, open-handed gentlemen. Only where the old Mr. Ladd was a cautious old duck, the new Mr. Ladd was a hell-for-leather, ride-'em-cowboy sort who got a real kick out of printing sensational news. You might say that all his inhibitions were removed.

In the weeks and months that followed, Mr. Ladd was right in there pitching with some of the most sensational news this town ever read.

"It's not me," he'd say honestly. "I always did want to print the real news, if I thought I could get by with it. And now that Old Four-Square's behind me, I can." And once he said: "I tell you, it's

just like that fellow what's-his-name in the Arabian Nights who had the wonderful lamp, and all he did to get what he wanted was to rub it."

Any time there was another of those borderline stories — and believe me, there were plenty of them under the new set-up — all Mr. Ladd had to do was poke his noggin out the window and see what Old Four-Square had to say about it.

Of course, once in a while she'd flash red. Like the time that pretty bank clerk got caught lifting a fistful of ten-spots from the teller's cage. *The Morning Post* got an exclusive on it while the cops were still grilling her. It was close to deadline, and there wasn't any libel or anything like that concerned, but just out of mere habit Mr. Ladd glanced at Old Four-Square and saw the warning.

"Glad I did, too," Mr. Ladd told Joe. He said he held up the story for re-checking, and what do you think? That girl had as fine a reputation as your Mrs. She'd just gone wrong that once. And why? Her old lady was like to die for lack of an operation, and it was the only way out the kid could see.

Once he found *that* out, Mr. Ladd moved in fast. He squared the girl with the bank and the cops, raised dough for the operation and found the kid a new job.

"I could have ruined the young-

ster by running that yarn," Mr. Ladd said.

Mr. Ladd had always been pretty much his own man, making his own decisions all his life, come good or bad. But as time went on he got to depending on Old Four-Square for just about everything — even his own thinking. Like maybe he wanted to buy a new suit, should it be a pin-stripe or a quiet check? Mr. Ladd would put it up to Old Four.

I won't say he ever deliberately used her for his own advantage. But we do have a Friday night poker game here that's almost a ritual and sometimes the stakes run pretty high. Mr. Ladd never was a red-hot poker player; just fair to middling, and sometimes he had his bad nights. So he got to asking Old Four whether it would be a good night or not, and if she flashed red he'd stay away. It got so, finally, that he stayed away most of the time.

Then there was the time the city election was coming up and what with that scandal about the two Good Government Councilmen, it was nip and tuck. Even the Gallup people refused to make any prediction. But Mr. Ladd sits down and writes out two predictions. One says that the Old Ward Crowd would win and the other says the Good Government would. And he took the first prediction to the window and held that up, and

Old Four flashed red. So he held up the Good Government prediction, and she flashed green. And then he held up another prediction, "slim margin?" And she flashed red, again. And he held up another prediction, "landslide?" And she flashed green.

Well, sir, Mr. Ladd ran that forecast with an eight-column banner the day before election, and everybody — including *The Morning Post's* owners — thought he was crazy. But when the returns came in and showed him right, there wasn't a more popular guy in town. And the paper not only gave him another bonus, but they actually raised his salary for his "shrewd insight into our town's politics". Mr. Ladd thought that was pretty funny.

By now I guess you're wondering what a wonderful lamp like that is doing sitting on this bar. It was like this: one day Mr. Ladd is standing at the window not thinking of anything much and Old Four down there, she's bossing the traffic smart as you please — red, green, red, green — in her usual impartial way. And suddenly Mr. Ladd happened to notice quite a crowd milling around inside an office reception room in the building across the side street.

It was one of these two-room office suites, and he could see not only into the reception room, but also into the connecting private

office where an old man sat at a desk. A nice-looking old codger with a thatch of white hair. And he was seeing each of these people, one by one, as his secretary let them into his office.

It looked to Mr. Ladd, from across the street, like the people all had anxious expressions when they entered the office; but that each one of them went away with a care-free smile. And Mr. Ladd wondered what sort of man it was who could make people happy just by talking to them a few minutes.

They were mostly run-of-the-mill sort of people, too. Elderly laboring men, bookkeepers, middle-aged school teachers, old ladies — that kind. So just playing a hunch, Mr. Ladd sent a reporter over to see what it was all about. He sent Max Sax.

Now, there isn't a shrewder reporter in town than little Max Sax. A real skeptic, you know, which is what a good reporter has to be. So Max went over and Mr. Ladd saw him enter the reception room, and after about an hour it came Max's turn to see the old man; and Mr. Ladd saw Max go into the private office and sit down and the old man start talking to him.

Max walked into the office poker-faced, but all of a sudden Mr. Ladd saw Max start beaming. And then Max reached into his pocket and handed the old man something, and the old man made

a note in a book and Max went away — happy as a lark like the rest of them. And five minutes later he was back in the city room with stardust in his eyes.

He walked up to the window where Mr. Ladd was still standing and he didn't even wait for the city editor to start popping questions. He just broke out: "Say, that old coot's all right!"

"Who is he?" asked Mr. Ladd.

"Nugget's his name," Max said.

"Dr. Wallingford Nugget. Investment counselor."

"Never heard of him," said Mr. Ladd.

"Naturally," said Max. "He's a retired missionary from South America. Got a framed certificate on the wall, and — you know what? He still keeps a Bible on his desk!"

"Continue," said Mr. Ladd.

"Well," said Max, still excited, "he was telling me about this uranium exchange thing, and —"

"What uranium exchange?" asked Mr. Ladd.

"Well, heck, you know," said Max, "there's the stock exchange and the produce exchange and the cotton exchange and in some countries there's a gold exchange, and so there's this here uranium exchange. And there's all kinds of dough in it for people who know about it."

Mr. Ladd looked across the street at the ever-increasing crowd

in the reception room.

"Seems like most everybody knows about it," he said, dry-like.

"They tell their friends," Max said.

"I thought the government bought up all the uranium, just like gold," Mr. Ladd said.

"That's produced in this country and Canada, that's right," Max said. "But there's lots of other countries where there's a free market — just like gold, too — in the Congo, maybe, and India and —"

"And just where is this uranium exchange?" asked the boss.

"Down in South America somewhere. I forget just where. But Dr. Nugget showed me some cable orders — you know the kind: 'Buy so many tons uranium ore', or 'Sell so many tons'. And with the price going up and up — gee whiz!"

Mr. Ladd looked at Max hard. It isn't like Max to get so enthusiastic about a story he forgets important details, and he figured that this Doc Nugget must have quite a persuasive personality.

"You talk with those folks out there?"

"Oh, sure, they're all for him."

"Then why do they all look so worried when they come in?"

"They're afraid he won't take their money any more."

"Any more?" said Mr. Ladd, surprised.

"It works like this. Dr. Nugget

guarantees them twenty per cent on their investment in one week. At the end of the week, they come in for their dividend. But they don't want it, see? They want to plow it back in for bigger profits. Doc — that's how they call him — he's reluctant to take it. He says himself that it's too good to last."

"Ha," said Mr. Ladd, and he's thinking of that old rascal, Ponzi, and the South Sea Bubble and that chain-letter craze.

"Sort of funny, him being a retired missionary. Does he say how he happened to learn about this good thing?"

"Oh, sure," said Max. "He doesn't hide anything. He says he heard about it down in South America just before retiring a few months ago. And being a man of the cloth, he didn't think it was right to keep people from knowing about it. Especially widows and orphans."

Mr. Ladd hardly needed to look down to see what old Four-Square had to say about all this; and sure enough, when he did look, she was flashing a bright red, meaning that the deal was no good.

"What was it I saw you give him?" he asked Max.

"Me? Well, today's payday you know, and he let me put in my whole hundred bucks. Gee, Mr. Ladd, I'd have invested more if I'd had it. Say! Would you sign an advance voucher for me for a

couple hundred, maybe?"

Mr. Ladd looked at Max like he'd never seen him before. He couldn't believe that any reporter of his could be so crazy.

"I think," he said coldly, "that you'd better take this next week off, Max. Without pay," he says.

Max hardly heard. He still had that stardust in his eyes.

"And do you know what he said when he accepted my money?" Max says. "He said, joking of course, 'You realize, Mr. Sax, I *might* abscond with this!' That proves how honest he is!"

Well, there was only one thing for Mr. Ladd to do, of course — both as a square-shooter himself and as a crusading city editor. And that was to expose this slick gent. It was an old swindle. The Doc merely paid dividends out of new capital investment, hoping that the investments would keep coming in so that he could keep the ball rolling. When the market for suckers dried up, the whole thing would collapse.

Mr. Ladd put a couple of reporters on the story and made sure this time that they didn't go near the persuasive old geezer. And he telephoned around South America and found there wasn't any such thing as a uranium exchange. And he found that the old man hadn't ever sent any cables — buy, sell, or any other kind.

He found out, too, that there

was no religious denomination in the country that ever had a Dr. Wallingford Nugget on its foreign mission roster. And he learned that the Doc didn't have any bank account. And that was right where he came up against a stone wall. There wasn't one damn thing in writing to prove what was going on — no cancelled checks, no deposits, no letters, no nothing. Not even receipts. Doc took cash — and cash only. And he had such a nice charming way about him that nobody ever asked for a receipt.

What made it worse was that even the suckers wouldn't talk. They had faith in him — even when the reporters told them there wasn't any such uranium exchange. And besides, Doc had primed 'em. He'd told them that, while it was okay to pass the word along to their friends, it wouldn't do for the newspapers to get hold of it. The general public, he said, would start investing, too. And that way he'd be swamped with so many orders that it might inflate the market beyond the point of diminishing returns.

Mr. Ladd called in the District Attorney's office and the F.B.I. and the S.E.C. and the Treasury agents. But the Government said it was out of their jurisdiction since Doc was operating strictly within the state. And the D.A.'s men couldn't dig up even as much evidence as Mr. Ladd.

Every step of the way, of course, Mr. Ladd consulted Old Four-Square, and every time he got the green signal to go ahead. And finally he sat down and wrote the story himself.

It was a pretty dangerous story, of course, but Mr. Ladd was in a hurry to get it in the paper. He just couldn't stand looking across the street every day and seeing all those poor people giving up their life's savings to that old man. And besides, he was banking on Old Four-Square to back him up.

Naturally, before he sent the story to the copy desk, he gave a quick glance down to Old Four. And by Harry! This time the light was out! Yes, sir, I swear — there was neither red nor green, pink nor blue nor purple nor anything else. She was just plain out.

Mr. Ladd came in here that night and I'm telling you, he was a mighty sick man. He hadn't dared depend on his own judgment, so of course he hadn't been able to run the story.

Things didn't get any better, either. That light was out three-four days, and Mr. Ladd was just itching to run the story. And every day there were more people in Doc Nugget's office, giving him their hard-earned money. And then one evening Mr. Ladd looked down and there was Old Four-Square bossing the traffic again, proud as ever. And Mr. Ladd

rushed the story over to the window and — as I live — she flashed red!

Mr. Ladd was fit to bust. It didn't make any sense. Every step of the way, mind you, she'd given him the green light. But when the story was all put together and he was ready to run it, she wouldn't let him.

He was still thinking about what a mess he was in when he went out to supper that night and he passed Old Four's standard. It occurred to him that maybe the Traffic Bureau men had taken her away and installed a new light. So he looked up at her. It was Old Four, all right; he'd know her anywhere, but she seemed sick. He timed her. And for the first time since he'd known her, she'd been off her button. She was giving maybe ninety seconds this time to north-south traffic and the next time maybe two minutes and the next time maybe eighty seconds. And the same east-west. Not impartial any more, you see. Just plain nuts.

Back in the office, Mr. Ladd stared down at her. And she said green this time and he got excited. But when he looked again, sort of mentally asking her what to do, she said red. Then green, then red, then green.

"Hell," said Mr. Ladd. "If you can't make up your mind about this blank-blank story, how in hell can I?"

And thinking about these poor widows and orphans, Mr. Ladd sent the story over to the copy desk anyway.

Some people might call Mr. Ladd a bit touched about this thing. But *I* don't think so. I know him too well.

He was still standing at the window, looking moodily down into the street, wondering if he'd done right and getting no coherent answer from Old Four when the presses started rolling and he could feel the building tremble like it always does, and he thought, "Well, it's in the lap of the gods now." And just then old Doc Nugget walked out of the building across the side street. He had a fat briefcase in one hand and he hailed a taxi and got in.

It was the east-west street, you know, and there was quite a bit of traffic and the cab had to wait a minute because Old Four had the red light against it. And then Mr. Ladd gasped at what he saw. The east-west light changed to green, but — the north-south light *stayed* green. And all in a moment there was one hellish mix-up.

The cab lunged ahead on the green and got smacked right on the side by a north-bound truck which veered off toward Old Four-Square. Two other cars tangled and a south-bound bus stopped sideways in the middle of the

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STOP ON THE RED

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crossing. Cars and trucks jammed every which way and Old Four-Square was still showing green both ways but the lights were sort of winking unsteadily.

Doc Nugget hopped out of the wrecked cab and started sprinting between cars toward the sidewalk, and it was then that Mr. Ladd realized that Doc was proving the case against himself by taking it on the lam. He still had that briefcase clutched in his hand, you see, and was in one heck of a hurry to get lost in the crowd.

But just then Old Four-Square — like a pitcher winning his own ball game, maybe, or maybe feeling right sorry that she gave Mr.

Ladd such a rough time — fell off her perch. And whether her standard had been brushed by the truck, who's to say? There was never any visible mark on it. But Old Four landed ker-smack right on top of Doc Nugget and knocked him cold. And his briefcase cracked open and spilled sawbucks and C-notes and gilt-edge stocks and bonds all over the gutter — half a million bucks' worth, they counted.

Mr. Ladd got down there plenty fast and had the cops pinch Doc. But he took time out to give Old Four here a friendly pat. And in making over the story for the next edition, he gave the old girl credit for blocking Doc's getaway and saving a lot of widows and orphans from the poorhouse.

As you can see, sir, Old Four got dented up pretty badly in that fall. And she was never any good after that — I mean, for anything except sentimental purposes. And when Mr. Ladd asked the city to give her to him for the club, they gladly obliged.

And Mr. Ladd, he didn't last much longer at *The Morning Post*. Not having her to depend on any more, you see . . .

Another Manhattan, sir? Right away. And would you care to invest another buck in Old Four? Now, that's right nice.