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ANTHONY SARIS

Outside, I just looked at Slim in contempt. "The stem won't wind!" I burst out

Blood from a Turnip

By JIM THOMPSON

WHAT a stinking way to make a living! I was thinking this, like always, as I walked into Duffy's. I buy precious metals house-to-house—old discarded jewelry, dental work, eyeglasses, anything worth a buck. I pay as little as I can, then I take the stuff to a wholesale buyer like Duffy, and he does the same to me.

He did it now. I emptied my buyer's box on the counter. Duffy sat hunched on his high stool, not touching the stuff. He just sat looking at me, a yellowed cigarette stump in his mouth, one pale eye sprouting a black loupe. I poked a battered old watchcase toward him. "Fourteen car—"

"It's stamped fourteen carats. So what? Carat stamps don't mean a thing on old stuff like this. It's just heavy plate, and that's what I'll pay for." I took his price; he was right. Then he gave me three dollars even for a handful of gold-wash junk, and I sat down on the bench along the wall to rest my feet and count my profits. For nine hours' arguing with suspicious housewives, I had eleven dollars' profit, and a meal in a hash joint to look forward to.

Tulsa Slim came in then—tired and hungry-looking. I waited to see how he'd done for the day. He checked in twenty-five pennyweight, a gold half of it high-carat dental gold, and Duffy pushed three ten-dollar bills across the counter. "You'll be rich someday," he said sarcastically. "At most you paid out eight bucks; you make twenty-two for an easy day's work." But Slim didn't smile. He looked miserable, and suddenly Duffy grinned. "Or did you?" he said. "Is there something you ain't told old Duffy? Some little housewife skin you today?"

"None of your business," Slim snapped, and I knew that's just what had happened and I started hating Duffy all over again. When you have a

lousy day, it's your tough luck, and he laughs in your face. And when you do find gravy, it's Duffy who really collects, and laughs all the harder. The occasional finds you make—like a hunk of antique jewelry—keep you in this hungry racket. But even then, it's Duffy, or someone like him, who gets rich. Once I picked up an antique brooch for three dollars, and sold it to Duffy for twenty. "Take it or leave it," he said, and I took it. I had to; like always, I needed the money, and I couldn't hang on to the brooch and wait. But Duffy could. And three weeks later, he sold that brooch to some collector for twenty times twenty dollars, and he laughed in my face when he told me.

That same mocking pleasure was in his face now. "Come on," he said. "What happened?" Slim looked at him, hating him, wishing, like we all did, that just once Duffy would have to take it, instead of dishing it out. But he opened his box, reached inside, then paused and said, "Every once in a while I learn that maybe honesty's the best policy. Maybe you'll learn that yourself someday."

Duffy just grinned. "I stop at this house," Slim said wearily, "and the dame has the usual cardboard box of family hand-me-downs—lodge emblems, tiepins, a watch chain—all gold wash. But there's also a watch, an old timer. I'm no expert on antique watches like Al"—he nodded at me—"but at least I can recognize one."

I strolled over to the counter; old watches are my specialty. "All I was thinking of," Slim said, "was getting the watch for a couple bucks, so I never even touched it or glanced at it. You single out one item, and these dames think it's the Taj Mahal. Two dollars for the boxful, lady," I said. She wants

to argue, but I just pick up my hat. "Three dollars," she says then. "Two fifty," I said, and she takes it." Slim took his hand out of his box. He was holding a blackened old watch, and Duffy threw me a quick, warning look.

I'd seen photographs of the four other watches in the world like this one; one is in a museum, two others are in private collections. A Connecticut watchmaker turned out five of them, sixty years ago, for five young Victorian dandies. They were key-winders with jewel-studded keys, and they weren't good watches, but today, the keys make those watches collector's pieces.

"A collector's item!" Slim said angrily. "I thought I had myself a collector's item, but look—" He tried to turn the watch stem; it wouldn't budge. "The damn stem won't turn," he said. "You can't even begin to move it. Why, the works in this potato must be solid rust!"

I THOUGHT he was going to slam the watch down on the counter, and I nearly yelled, but he put it down gently. "You know these collectors!" he said to me, angrily. "The watch has to work, but to keep time, or they won't shell out. So there you are." Then he said more quietly, "Maybe honesty is best. If I'd tried the watch out, took a chance on paying off five bucks if it was any good, I'd never have bought it."

"Too bad," Duffy said casually, and picked up the watch. He twisted at the stem, and of course it wouldn't turn. "You're right," he said. "The works are shot, and he put the watch down. "But still," he added, sounding bored, "I might pick up a five spot for it, with luck." He took two one-dollar bills from his cash drawer, and laid them on the counter. "So I'll take it off your hands, with the rest of the stuff. You're only out fifty cents."

"You mean it?" Slim said, his eyes widening, and when Duffy nodded, he grabbed up the bills and turned toward the door, like he was scared Duffy might change his mind. Duffy winked as I turned to leave; he knew what I was going to tell Slim, and he didn't care, now that he had the watch. He even got a boot out of the deal.

Outside, I just looked at Slim in contempt. "The stem won't wind!" I burst out. Slim looked at me blankly. "Listen," I said, as patiently as I could, "up until about 1875 you had to wind a watch with a key, a separate key; that's how they were made. Then somebody invented the stem-winder. But the guy who made this watch, around 1890, did it on a special order. Some gay blades wanted something unusual. So what does he do? He makes up five key-winders, with jeweled keys and adds an ornamental stem! There's nothing wrong with that watch; the stem isn't supposed to turn, you jerk. And Duffy knew it perfectly well! They're collector's pieces today!"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Duffy asked. "I couldn't," I answered.

"The last one of those watches brought two hundred and fifty dollars at auction, and it was exactly like the one you sold Duffy for two lousy bucks. Of course it had the original key, and that makes a difference. The collectors want not only the watch, but the key. But even without it, that old timer will still bring fifty, maybe sixty dollars."

Slim looked astonished. "And with the original key, it might have brought two hundred?"

"Easy," I said, rubbing it in.

"Well—Slim shrugged—"I wouldn't have got a fair price myself. Even if I'd walked in with watch and key both, Duffy would have got them for fifty bucks top. Remember that antique brooch you found?"

"Yeah," I said sadly. "And now he's got your old two-buck timer, and it'll bring fifty for sure."

"That's right," Slim said pleasantly, and pulled his fist out of his pocket, opening his hand. There on his palm, coated with the unmistakable tarnish of sixty years, lay a small, jeweled strip of metal—the original key. "But now," Slim said, "I've got a two-hundred-buck key." He grinned. "Now I'll get 'That's right' Slim—out of that watch. Because now he's got to have this key, and for once he's gonna pay for it!" Then I grinned, too, and we went triumphantly back into Duffy's. ▲▲▲