

PINK EARS

by Murray Leinster

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I

The Stratford is a hotel for men only, and has the air of quiet seclusion that usually is associated with a conservative club. The lobby is small and far from ornate. The smoking-room is large and comfortable. The dining-room is low-ceilinged and quaint,—a place where one can smoke comfortably,—and the kitchen produces viands that are worth a special trip to taste. Altogether, the Stratford is a place for those who want comfort, quiet, and the best of everything.

James Craig, from his air of well-being, had enjoyed it to the full. An hour before, he had arisen from his table with that sensation of internal comfort that can come only from a well-ordered and well-cooked meal. He had chosen a cigar with discrimination, and lighted it with care. He had spent possibly twenty minutes or more in the smoking-room, idling over his newspaper in comfortable repletion, and then had scribbled a note at a writing-desk. With the methodical air of one to whom life is an excuse for the perpetration of systematic actions, he drew out a small notebook and extracted a stamp. He affixed the stamp and made a note in the book. It read:

Postage on letter to firm	\$.02
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The note was just beneath three others:

Dinner	\$3.45
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Tip	.25
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Cigar	.25
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He reached toward a button to summon a bell-boy, and then changed his mind. It was almost possible to read his thoughts by his actions. He glanced out of the window nearby, and saw the last golden rays of the evening sun striking upon street and passersby. One who watched him would have guessed at his mental processes so:—

“I’ll have a bell-boy mail this.... No.... This is a beautiful day.... A walk after dinner will do me good.... I’ll stroll out and mail it, or stroll out, anyway....”

He tucked the envelope carefully in his pocket, rose, and sauntered out of the doorway. He moved slowly, carelessly, idling with the relish of a man who finds little time to idle.

He was gone for less than ten minutes altogether. When he came back in the door and passed through the lobby his expression had grown subtly more content. The ten-minutes’ exercise had “shaken down” his dinner, his cigar had proved all that the brand warranted, and he was at peace with the world. As he made his way into the elevator he was even humming a little.

“Three,” he commented, as the car shot upward. “By the way, is there a good show in town tonight?”

“Yessuh, Ah reg’n so. Dey usual’ is. Y’might ax at de desk.”

The elevator-door clanged open at the third floor and he went out. The elevator-boy saw him fitting a key into the lock of his room. He was still humming. The elevator-door shut, and the cage dropped to the lobby floor again.

“Gosh,” said the elevator-boy to his *confrère*, the chief bell-hop. “Dem trabelin’ men sho’ has it easy. Dey goes to de shows an’ jes’

changes it in d' expense account. Y' bettuh tote out half a pint. Dis gen'leman in three-eighty looks lak he mought be intrusted."

The chief bell-hop rose.

"Bress Gawd fo' Prohibition," he commented piously. "Ef t'wasn't fo' de law, us hotel-help would hab t' live on ouah tips."

He sauntered into a small private closet and a little later stepped briskly up the stairs. It was certainly not more than two minutes from the time the elevator-boy saw Craig unlock the door, humming a little, to the time the bell-hop knocked softly. But where the elevator-boy carried away an impression of carefree contentment and casual cheer, the bell-hop straightened involuntarily when he heard a voice from within.

"Come in!"

The voice was a harsh croak, a rasping gasp, metallic and unhuman. The bell-hop pushed open the door cautiously and peered in. The room looked as if a whirlwind had struck it. Sheets, rugs, pillow-cases were thrown helter-skelter about the place, and at the moment James Craig was on his knees before a suit-case. Where he had looked carefree and at peace with the world, he now looked ghastly. His face was a pasty, chalky white. His eyes seemed to have sunk into his head, and they stared at the bell-hop with a strange deadness.

"I've been robbed!" he croaked harshly. "I've been robbed!"

The bell-hop ducked instinctively.

"Bress Gawd!" he gasped. "Y' don' mean it!"

A choked sob burst from the throat of the chalky-faced man.

“I’ve been robbed!” he repeated in a certain strange calm. Then he sobbed again, his whole body writhing with the sound. “My God! Eighty thousand dollars!”

The bell-hop jumped a foot in the air at mention of that sum and departed swiftly. The result of his flight was seen a moment later in a pale and worried desk-clerk who came hurriedly into the room. Craig was moving dumbly about, looking hopelessly here, there—everywhere.

“You—you’ve been robbed, sir?”

“Eighty thousand dollars!” Craig seemed stunned by the calamity. “I’m ruined! Ruined! Eighty thousand dollars!”

He sat down suddenly in a chair and stared before him with lack-lustre eyes. The desk-clerk, alarmed as he was for the reputation of the house, could not but feel sympathy for the man who had changed so absolutely in so few minutes. His very lips were gray. His eyes seemed to have retreated deep into his skull. His voice was a pitiable parody of a living man’s voice. It was dead, harsh, lifeless.

“Carrying bonds from New Orleans to New York,” he said dully. “Nobody knew I had ’em. Can’t sleep on trains, and stopped over here to have a night’s rest. I went out for dinner.... The bonds are gone.”

“I’ll send for the police,” the desk-clerk assured him. “We’ve a splendid detective force here. If anybody could find them, Jamison can.”

Craig's fingers unclenched and he automatically began to look through the articles in his suit-case again, in the utterly forlorn hope that he might yet be mistaken, and might yet find the bonds.

"Eighty thousand dollars!" he said apathetically. "I'm ruined! They'll suspect me, even me, of stealing them. And nobody knew I had them!" He groaned. "Nobody knew I had them!"

The clerk slipped from the room and telephoned frantically, while he gave orders that assured the continued presence of every one of the hotel employees and a careful note of every guest who left the place. He would be able to give the police a list of every man who slipped out, and would be able to produce all the hotel help. It was quick and efficient work. But once that was done, the desk-clerk allowed himself to think sympathetically of the man in the room above. He had seen Craig stroll into the elevator, pleasantly flushed by his dinner and walk. And now that chalk-white man with sunken eyes, croaking of ruin and disgrace....

The desk-clerk shook his head in genuine regret.

II

A rather shabby young man with a cigarette dangling from his mouth strolled into the room without the formality of knocking. He nodded ungraciously at Craig.

“I’m Jamison,” he said gloomily. “Police Headquarters. They sent me down to find out about this robbery. What’s up?”

Craig, no more than the wreck of the debonair man of a half hour before, told his story, with his eyes glowing strangely from sunken sockets. Jamison listened from a comfortable chair, gazing at the ceiling.

“Y’ went out?” he queried, when Craig had finished. “Why didn’t you leave the bonds in the hotel safe?”

“I should have,” groaned Craig wretchedly. “But no one knew I had them with me. Only the president of my firm and myself knew I had them. We thought that if I just went on up to New York quite casually, as if on an ordinary business trip, there’d be no suspicion of my having anything valuable with me. God! If I’d only known!”

“How long were you gone?” asked Jamison, fishing in his baggy pockets for tobacco and paper to roll another cigarette.

“I don’t know,” said Craig despairingly. “I finished my dinner, wrote a note, and went out to the street. I asked the way to the nearest mail box and dropped my letter in. Then I came back, came up to my room, and the bonds were gone! I’m ruined! I’ll be suspected of stealing them myself!”

Jamison yawned and rolled a cigarette with one hand, watching his own fingers with the absorbed attention of one who has but recently acquired the feat.

“Well,” he said in a moment, after licking the paper. “I guess we’ve got a job ahead of us. What train did you come in on?”

“I got in about four-thirty.”

“That’s number twenty-seven,” commented Jamison. “You came to the hotel right away?”

“Yes. I registered, washed up, had my dinner, and——”

“Bonds negotiable?” queried Jamison uninterestedly. “What issue and numbers?”

Craig told him.

“N.O. and W. 4½s,” Jamison yawned again. “Twenty-nine four eighty-seven to twenty-nine five twenty-two. All right.”

Craig rose as Jamison stood up negligently. Craig looked like a wreck. His face was a sickly white and his eyes burned from cavernous depths. His lips were trembling a little.

“They’re going to suspect me!” he said desperately. “Only one man beside myself knew I had those bonds. They’re gone—stolen. Man, you’ve got to clear me! Search me, search the room! Put me under arrest. Do something!”

“I’ll put you under surveillance,” said Jamison, “if you like.” He yawned. “Just to prove to your firm you didn’t hide out on ’em. I’ll send a man up in a little while.”

“I can give an account of every movement since I’ve been in the city,” said Craig suddenly. “Look here. I keep an account of all my expenditures. You can check me up. Here’s my dinner. Here’s the tip, and a postage-stamp on the letter to my firm. Here’s a magazine I bought.... You can check up the time on every one of them. You can trace my movements that way.”

Jamison glanced uninterestedly at the open page held in Craig’s shaking hand.

“Don’t get so excited,” he said grouchyly. “Don’t y’ know that if you had swiped the stuff you’d have faked a book like that?”

He eyed the page for a moment and sat down again, as if a new chain of questioning had occurred to him.

“Say, do you often come through here?” he inquired.

“Yes, on an average of once a month.”

“Stop at this hotel?”

“Yes....” Craig began to look hopeful. “Do you suppose some one of the help—”

“How big a package were the bonds?”

“There were eighty of them. They’d make quite a wad of paper.”

“Make a man’s pocket bulge out?”

“Surely.”

“The hotel-clerk kept all the employees waiting,” observed Jamison. “I’ll take a look. Was your place much messed up when you got back?”

“Practically like this. I left the bonds in my suit-case. When I opened the door I saw the place was torn upside down, everything thrown all about.”

“You’d left your suit-case open?” queried Jamison. “They’d look in there first....”

“The bonds were under a shirt—in the folds of a shirt. At first glance they wouldn’t seem to be there.”

Jamison puffed thoughtfully for a moment.

“Ever use your firm’s stationery here?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Just thinking,” said Jamison. “You see, if you dropped a letter-head in a waste-basket, whoever cleaned up the room might connect you up.... Say, your firm is a bank. You come through every so often. Suppose you leave a letter-head. Banks sometimes send currency from one place to another by messenger. A chambermaid or bell-hop might notice....”

Craig’s face brightened. Jamison wore an air of innocent pride.

“You have to think of those things,” he said modestly. “I’ll tell you. You go down and get the desk-clerk and a cop. Tell the desk-clerk to have the darkies that clean up this floor come in, one by one. Come back with the clerk and the cop.”

Craig obediently started for the door, hesitated, glanced back, and then went out. Jamison allowed himself the luxury of a grunt when the door closed, and the expression of innocent pride vanished utterly from his features, leaving them somewhat bored and entirely disgusted.

“Sloppy work,” he commented gloomily, to himself. “I wonder where he keeps his shaving-soap. That’s the answer, ten to one.”

He began to rummage in Craig’s suit-case.

III

When Craig pushed open the door again with the room-clerk and the policeman, Jamison was standing by the bureau, where there was a light. He seemed to be examining something in his hand. Craig looked vastly more hopeful, though his face was still a deadly white and his eyes were still sunken deeply into his head.

“This officer,” he announced, “saw me when I went out to mail that letter. Tell him about it, Officer.”

“I saw him mail a letter, sorr,” said the policeman. “I was standin’ by the mail-box whin he come up. He axed me for a light, sorr, and lighted his cigar with it. It had gone out. Thin he put his letter in the box. ’Twas a small letter, sorr, in one av th’ hotel envelopes.”

Jamison nodded uninterestedly.

“Oh, all right,” he said wearily. “Nobody thought he mailed ’em away and then called for the police to find ’em. Say,” he turned to the hotel-clerk, “when did you open up this part of the hotel?”

“About six months ago.”

“New help?” queried Jamison. He sank into a chair and yawned.

“Partly,” said the clerk. “The chambermaid’s been here a long time. The cleaner for this floor is Sam Whitehouse. You know him, I think. He’s a pretty good negro. Been fined a couple of times for shooting craps, but that’s all.”

Jamison sat up.

“Sam Whitehouse!” he said with more energy than he had displayed before. “Why didn’t you say so before? Look here.”

He took an envelope from his pocket and scribbled a few words on the back, then handed it to the officer.

“You can attend to it better than anyone else,” he commented. “See to it, won’t you? I’ll wait here.”

He lay back in his chair and frowned at the clerk.

“I wish you hotel people wouldn’t hire known criminals,” he complained. “They’re always making trouble. If there’s a smart darky in the city, it’s that same Sam. He’d steal the brass plate off a coffin—and get away with it. I guess we’ll have him now, though....”

He rolled a cigarette and puffed gloomily on it until the policeman returned.

“Got him, sorr. An’ he had the bonds. A thick wad av thim, sorr.”

Craig sprang to his feet.

“What!”

“He’s got the bonds,” said Jamison wearily. “You see, I guessed right when I said you’d probably left a letter-head or something. He just waited for you to come back to town and went through your room.”

Craig’s face was a puzzle for an instant, and then he sank back into his seat and mopped his forehead, patting it with his handkerchief.

“Thank God!” he gasped.

“Well, we’re through,” said Jamison. “Not much of a case, this. You can get your bonds in the morning at the police station.”

He strolled out the door with the policeman and room-clerk. Craig watched the door close behind them and sprang to his feet in a noiseless bound.

“Good God!” he muttered, desperately. “How—how—”

In a catlike leap he sprang to the cheap bureau in the room. With a jerk he pulled out an empty drawer. He stared at it for an instant, and then brought it down with a crash upon his knee, splintering the bottom utterly. The real bottom of the drawer came out in fragments, and a layer of veneer that fitted neatly over it was twisted and wrecked as well. And tumbling out upon the floor were the eighty neatly engraved bonds, fallen from their hiding place in the neatly contrived false bottom, just where Craig had placed them two hours before. And yet—

“I thought so,” said Jamison’s voice wearily. “It was a sloppy job.”

There was an infinitely bright flash and the room was full of smoke.

IV

“You’re mugged, now,” observed Jamison. “I guess a flash-light picture will go well in court....”

“His ears were pink,” explained Jamison, his tone indicating the ultimate of boredom. “His ears were nice and pink. That gave him away.”

Craig was huddled in a chair in the police-station. The big policeman stood guard beside him and the desk-sergeant listened sympathetically to Jamison’s tale of woe.

“My Gawd,” said Jamison disgustedly. “I haven’t seen a really neat job in so long you’d think everybody with brains had turned honest. Look at him, now. He passed through here once a month for six months or so, carrying stuff from New Orleans to New York and back. He was a regular at the hotel, and the clerk always gave him the same room, and he saw it had one o’ these cheap made-by-the-million bureaus in it. And he set to work from that!”

He flung away his perpetual cigarette and grunted.

“He took some measurements of the inside, an’ got a piece of veneer to fit the bottom of one of the drawers. Then, today, he climbed off the train, went to the hotel, took his bonds and laid ’em, neat, in the drawer, trimmed up his veneer to fit exactly, and glued it down on top of ’em. To look at it, it was a perfectly empty drawer, and nobody looks for secret compartments in hotel furniture, particularly of the made-by-the-million kind. He wandered downstairs, ate his dinner while the glue dried, smoked a

cigar, and went back up to his room and yelled bloody murder. He thought he'd get away with the story that his room had been robbed while he was out!"

The desk-sergeant shook his head sympathetically.

"Tst! Tst!..." he said commiseratingly.

"He had a good make-up on" commented Jamison morosely. "He looked like the wrath o' Gawd, and he played his part pretty well, but he overdid it, of course. Showed me a notebook to check up his movements by—and he'd made an entry in it while there was a bit of glue on his finger. The smudge told a lot, since I'd already made up my mind he was tryin' to steal from himself. Say"—he addressed the prisoner—"were you thinkin' maybe your firm would prosecute you for the theft and be unable to get a conviction for lack of evidence?"

The prisoner seemed to shrink a little farther into himself, but did not reply.

"That was it," said Jamison gloomily. "Once he'd been tried, you know, they couldn't have done a thing no matter how much proof they got that he had recovered and was selling the bonds later."

"He gave himself away, you say?" the desk-sergeant asked.

"Dead away," admitted Jamison depressedly. "I knew he'd done it, the minute I first saw him, and if that wasn't enough, I sent him out to get the room-clerk and he stopped in the doorway to take a last look straight where he'd put the bonds. And the first place he looked when he came back was the same spot. It was a shame to pinch him, he was so innocent."

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