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A Queen's Ransom

By Jonathan Latimer

The Story Thus Far:

WHO, using red ink, signing himself "The Eye," and demanding the payment of fifty thousand dollars, is sending young Penn Essex threatening letters? At Essex's Florida estate, William Crane, a detective, and his assistant, Thomas O'Rourke, are at work on the case when, to the delight of the sensational newspapers, Camelia Essex, Penn's sister, is kidnaped!

A few hours later, Essex receives another letter—it is pinned to the pillow in his bedroom; and Crane is similarly honored with a message, likewise printed in red ink, which warns him to drop the investigation. . . . Among those who flit in and out of Essex's house (an armed camp) are: Major Eastcomb, Essex's confidential adviser (who hopes to marry Camelia); Tony Lamphier, who is also in love with Essex's sister; Eve Boucher and her husband, Gregory; Sybil Langley, an actress; Dawn Day, a night-club entertainer; and Imago Paraguay, once a spy in Cuba, now a professional dancer.

For a time, Crane keeps an eye on Roland Tortoni, owner of a night club and gambling house, to whom Essex (whose sole income is from a trust fund and who is in financial difficulties) owes twenty-five thousand dollars which he refuses to pay. But Tortoni is murdered, and so passes out of the picture. Another suspect is Count di Gregorio, a Cuban revolutionist with whom Camelia has become infatuated; shadowed day and night by two of Crane's confidantes, Doc Williams and Eddie Burns, he is living in a Miami hotel.

Believing that Essex is withholding something of importance, Crane searches his rooms. He learns that Dawn Day (one of the guests)

has access to Essex's suite from her bedroom; and he finds a bottle of red ink! . . . With Essex, Crane and O'Rourke present, Major Eastcomb accuses Boucher of trying to win Camelia's affections. The major explains that Boucher is on the verge of losing his estate in Virginia, that he is planning to divorce his wife and marry Camelia—if the girl will have him. "A fifty-thousand-dollar ransom would help, wouldn't it, Boucher?" Eastcomb concludes. As O'Rourke steps between the two furious men, Craig, the butler, enters. "The reporters outside," he announces, "would like to ask you about this, Mr. Essex." He hands Essex a Miami newspaper.

Essex passes the paper on to Crane, points to an advertisement. Crane reads: "Money is ready. Please contact. Essex."

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SO YOU did decide to pay the ransom," Crane said, passing the paper to O'Rourke.

Essex said, "We put ads in all the Miami papers."

"It's going to be interesting when The Eye contacts you," Crane said. "I've never yet heard of a foolproof way of receiving a ransom. Are you going to let the police in on it?"

"I don't know," said Essex.

"Certainly we are." Major Eastcomb was pouring himself a large drink of whisky. "Do you think we'd take a chance of your bungling this, too?"

Crane ignored him. "What are you going to tell the reporters?" he asked Essex.

"That I'm ready to pay the ransom."

"I think it would be a good idea to say you intend to keep any messages received from the kidnapers secret until Camelia is returned."

"Yes, I guess it would."

O'Rourke said, "I'd tell 'em the police aren't going to be called in, even if it isn't true."

"Sort of lull The Eye's suspicions," said Lamphier.

"He's too smart for that," said Crane. "But it can't hurt to try."

Essex said, "Maybe we really should keep the police out."

"I won't authorize the use of the money unless the police have full knowledge," said Major Eastcomb.

"I guess the police are in, then," said Crane.

O'Rourke said, "I think they'll be reasonable. In New York when the Frachetti boy was snatched, they didn't even try to trail the guy who took out the ransom."

"I'll speak to the district attorney," said the major. "He'll see the police don't jeopardize Camelia's safety."

Essex said, "We can probably arrange to have them notified the instant the ransom is paid."

"We better hold off until Camelia is safe," said Tony Lamphier.

"We better hold off until we get an idea how The Eye wants the ransom paid," said Crane.

"I'll see the reporters," Essex said.

"Let's join the ladies," suggested Boucher.

CHAIRS, feet scraped the red tile floor. A servingman, Carlos, peeped in at them through the swinging door to the butler's pantry. Their movement toward the door made cigarette smoke swirl over their heads. O'Rourke waited for Crane.

"I thought we were going to have a free-for-all," he said.

"The major's certainly out for trouble."

"He's eager t' put the snatching on someone."

"Yes . . . very."

"I'd like to slug him once."

"You might as well," Crane said.

"Pretty nearly everyone has."

They walked toward the patio, and O'Rourke asked, "What's the program?"

"We got to find 'Buster' Brown." Crane told O'Rourke about Essex's and Miss Day's bedroom and how he had seen Brown with a bottle of red ink. "We have to find out what he was doing with it."

"Questioning him ought to be fun," O'Rourke said.

Over the patio, in a navy blue sky, hung a three-quarter moon. The milky light outlined shapes, made everything appear black and white, as in a photographic negative. The wind was sweet and lazy; it sighed through the palms and spread the odors of jasmine.

Crane pulled a metal chair over to Imago Paraguay. "May I?"

"Of course."

He sat down beside her. "It is hard to believe in crime on a night like this."

Her face was exquisite in the moonlight. "Not for me." Her skin was as pale, as perfectly textured as marble.

"Is something wrong?"

The moonlight was cream-colored on the beach, chromium bright on the crests of breaking waves. The surf made a gentle whoosh at intervals, like a big animal exhaling. The murmur of other voices filled the patio.

"Yes." Her voice sank to a whisper.

"Someone threatens me."

"Who?"

"I think it best not to tell you."

He gave her a cigarette. "Is it di Gregario?"

"I will not tell you." In taking the cigarette her fingers brushed his.

"What's he up to now?" He held a match in his cupped hands, leaned toward her. "I thought he was afraid enough of you to try to do something to you." The flame from the match showed her scarlet lips, the deep blue shadows

under her eyes, the hollows in her cheeks.

"I ha-ave told you nothing." She steadied his hands with hers, lit the cigarette. "I may later this evening, but now . . ."

"I don't understand."

"I will do this with you." When she stood up he was surprised, as usual, at her height. "I will, if I do not say otherwise, give you some valuable information tonight."

He stood up. "When?"

"At two o'clock, say?"

"All right. But where?"

For an instant her hand touched his, pressed it slightly. "You may come to my room." She detached her hand, moved away, leaving a faint odor of sandalwood.

O'ROURKE met Crane upstairs, in the hall outside Brown's room. It was quite warm and O'Rourke wiped sweat off his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

"I could use some of that Dutch beer," he said.

"We need something stronger than that," said Crane. His knuckles hesitated three inches from the wood. "Where do you want the body sent?"

"Nuts." O'Rourke took his revolver from his underarm holster, tucked it in his belt. "I'll bump him if he gets tough."

Crane knocked, his knuckles making a hollow sound on the door. "Yeah?" said a hoarse voice.

Crane shoved open the door.

Chester Brown was reading on his bed. The light falling on his face outlined a zigzag scar on his right cheek illuminated clasped hands tattooed on

his hairy chest. He wore black underwear shorts. His legs were very hairy.

"Whacha want?" he asked Crane.

"We want to ask a few questions."

He didn't seem particularly surprised to see them. His muscles bunched, unbunched as he got to a sitting position. "You're the dicks, ain't you?" His right ear looked as though it had been badly frozen.

"Yeah," Crane said.

O'Rourke closed the door.

"Well, I got nothing to tell you."

"Wait until we ask you somethin'," O'Rourke said.

"I'll talk when I please." He swung his feet to the floor. "I got a belly full of cops."

"Sit down," said O'Rourke.

Brown sank back on the bed, his eyes on O'Rourke's gun.

"We aren't cops," Crane said. "We're working for Mr. Essex." He sat in a straight chair. "If you want to keep working for him you'll try to help us."

"If you want to keep healthy, you'll try," said O'Rourke.

Sullenly, Brown said, "What d'you want to know?"

Crane leaned forward in the chair so he could move quickly. "What do you know about The Eye?"

Brown scowled at O'Rourke. "Put that rod down and I'll show you what I know."

"Look," said Crane. "We want some help."

"You pick a bad way to ask for it."

"We were afraid you'd cool us."

"I may."

O'Rourke said, "No, you won't."

"Be reasonable," Crane said. "We're trying to get Miss Essex back. You're in favor of that, aren't you?"

"Yeah, she's a nice broad," Brown said. "It's swell of you to say so," O'Rourke said.

Brown half rose from the bed.

"Sit down," said Crane. "I got a notion to throw you in the can."

"Tell this mick to lay off," said Brown. O'Rourke asked, "What have you got on him, Bill?"

"The notes. He's the only person who could have stuck the note on Essex's bed in the Walpern."

"Oh, yeah?" said Brown.

"Yeah."

BROWN leaned forward on the bed. "How about that second note?" His hands were on his knees. "I was in Richmond when that came."

"You got a pal," said O'Rourke.

"Probably that cute little French maid," Crane nodded as though everything was becoming clear to him. "That Céleste."

"The hell!" Scar tissue on Brown's knuckles was the color of pork rind. "Just because I date a broad don't mean we're planning a kidnaping."

"It doesn't look good."

Brown's scowl was replaced by alarm. "You guys don't really think I been writing those notes?"

"We don't know," said O'Rourke.

"Your attitude," said Crane. "You don't seem to want to co-operate."

"You got me all wrong. It's the way you come busting in here . . . a guy'll stand just so much."

"Stumble-bums!" said O'Rourke. "Tough until you're in a corner."

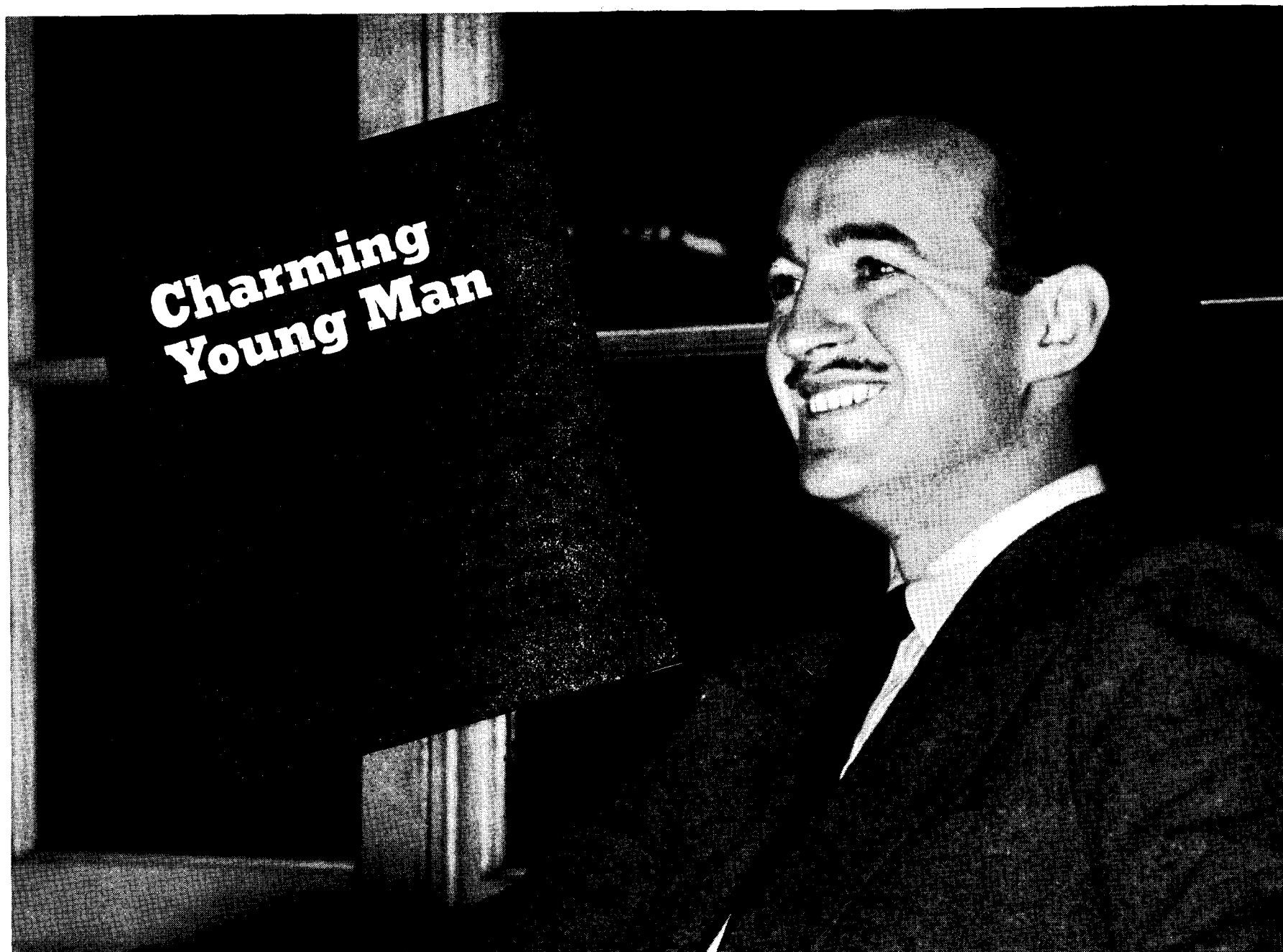
Brown's eyes glowed, but he took it. These guys wouldn't be so wise, he thought, unless they figured they had

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ILLUSTRATED BY
HARRY BECKHOFF



"What do you know about The Eye?" Crane said. Brown scowled at O'Rourke. "Put that rod down and I'll show you what I know," he said



IT WAS the worst examination paper they had ever seen. Absolutely the worst. "Listen, Niven," they told him sternly. "Give up any idea you have about entering the Navy. The Army—yes. The Navy—no. An important part of Navy life involves the aiming of big guns, and the finding of a ship's exact position. Both of these are done by mathematics. Evidently you are not a natural mathematician. Out of a possible 300 your mark in this examination is eight."

"That isn't very good," Niven said humbly.

"You are right," they said crisply. "That isn't very good."

And that's how David Niven broke into Hollywood. Not right away, mind you. Having had to give up the British Navy, he went to Sandhurst, Britain's West Point, and became an officer and a gentleman. From there it was only a hop, skip and a scotch to Canada and then of course came New York and Cuba and one day he woke up with a hangover on a Japanese freighter bound for San Francisco. After that Hollywood was easy, even though the only acting he had ever done was to pretend that he wasn't hungry when he really was. It's a press agent's dream—this story of Niven's—and if he hadn't told it to me himself I wouldn't believe it either.

Midway through the story I said gently to him, "Sometimes I write fiction, David, but if I ever wrote some of these tales you're telling me they'd say I was crazy. Now leave the fiction out of it and give me the facts, because the story is good enough without faking."

He shook his head gloomily, "I know. I know it all sounds screwy but honestly you can check up on everything I say, and if you find one thing is wrong, why, kill the whole story."

So we ordered another beer and this young man who recently made such a hit in *The Prisoner of Zenda* went on with his story and afterward I checked up as much as I could and much to my surprise the story stood up on its own legs. For several years young Niven was a bum, trading his smile and his charm for ham and eggs, not because he was constitutionally fitted for the part but because he couldn't get himself a job. Now, of course, he's all set. He's Goldwyn's pet; he's box office, and to escape the ultimate stardom which looms he'll have to break both legs, both arms and his accent.

The Bookmakers' Delight

After the Navy people waved him away so emphatically he went, as we have said, to Sandhurst. When he was commissioned he hurried to Malta, a British base plumb in the middle of the Mediterranean.

"It was great fun being an officer and a gentleman," he says a bit ruefully. "I mean it was fun if you could afford it. I really couldn't afford it."

When Niven looks back from the hoary pinnacle of his twenty-eight years one man looms above the horizon of memory, a gentleman named Mike Trubshawe who was also a second lieutenant in the Highland Light Infantry. He was, in fact, the oldest second lieutenant in the British Army. He had too

much fun in the Army ever to take advancement in rank seriously, so his superior officers reciprocally decided not to take him seriously.

It was hot at Malta. It was especially hot when you had to drill while wearing a heavy steel helmet. Both Lieutenant Mike and Lieutenant David decided to do something about it. They sent to London and had two papier-mâché helmets made, exact replicas of the steel helmets they were supposed to wear. It was all right then. Their fellow officers wondered why they never perspired in the hot rays of the sun; why they carried their heads so jauntily on parade. That is, until it rained one day in the midst of drill.

"Our painted papier-mâché helmets started to run badly, then wilt," he says sadly, "and in two minutes we looked like two drunken gnomes with bluebells on our heads."

It was a little bit after this that Niven decided to give up the Army. The life was grand but it was so ordered that there was little chance of asserting one's personality. The Army pattern was a rigid one. So many years as a junior officer, then a slight advancement, and so it went.

"I could look ahead twenty years and see myself sitting in the Army and Navy Club behind a big Scotch and soda, telling the youngsters how great the regiment was in the good old days," Niven says. "Then the financial question was becoming—well, not desperate, but intriguing. The trouble is that you can get unlimited credit if you are an officer and a gentleman and my will power was such that I found it easy to take advantage of

that credit. Oh, I was the bookmakers' delight all right, although I was slow pay. It got so that they were calling up my colonel and asking him please to persuade me to pay just a little on account."

Like many a one before him, Niven decided to seek his fortune in America. To him America meant Canada. A friend of his, Philip Astley, was about to make the same quest, so David decided to go along.

Even now he had no idea that his destiny would ever lead to Hollywood. Once he had met Eddie Goulding in London. He had met Sally Blane, too, and they were the only picture people he knew. He lived in Canada for a time and it wasn't much fun. It wasn't much fun because he was broke, he was untrained to anything except the business of being an officer and a gentleman and although these were interesting qualities they were not economically salable. So he went to work with a road gang that was building a bridge in the Redeau Lake district.

"Sixteen cents an hour I got," he says, "and I earned it. How I earned it!"

Meeting the Best People

You can't buy many clothes on sixteen cents an hour and you can't even afford to have an operation. Not even a little operation like having tonsils yanked. And he had to have his tonsils yanked. There was a veterinarian in a near-by village who sometimes took time off from doctoring horses to yank tonsils. He charged ten dollars if he was

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