

“Noon Edition”

Richard J. O. Greene

NANNY Martin sprawled against the corner of the building and stared directly into the brilliance of the street light. He felt like crying — the champagne had made him feel like crying, and the little gold statue in his hand made him feel like crying.

He remembered how bare the room had looked when everyone had gone; how hopelessly alone he had felt when the door closed and interrupted the last peal of drunken laughter. The party was over now — the last after-dinner cigar had long since burned out, and the white-shirted men had all gone home and left him alone.

His eyes were burning and heavy, and the light hurt them, but every time he looked away the buildings began to totter again, so he squinted them shut tight and leaned harder against the wall. He wished he were home — home in bed. He wished he were home and in bed and asleep — fast asleep, so the buildings wouldn't move anymore.

He spit, with a great effort, and watched the spittle fall into the dust in the gutter and blossom into a flower of tiny, dust covered balls. He thought he would spit again, but his mouth was dry and his tongue feelingless, so he decided to go home, and stumbled off into the center-of-the-block darkness.

A brisk October wind whirled up the naked street, sending skirls of rattling leaves, from distant trees, and a deluge of debris scampering about the gutters.

Nanny pulled the lapels of his tuxedo about his throat with his free hand. The other hand became cold and numb, and the little gold statue felt hard and heavy and cold. He gurgled a chuckle and grinned down at the statue; cold gold—boy, that was a good one—cold gold.

The flimsy glow of an all-night saloon in the distance warmed his spirit, and he forgot about home, where a picture of September Morn always hung crooked over the rumpled bed. He forgot about everything, except the gold statue and the white-shirted men. He tried hard, listening intently to the hollow click of his heels on the pavement, and counting, losing track, and counting again, his bouncing steps, but he could not forget them.

An aged derelict shuffled from out of the darkness of a doorway and petitioned in bitter, alcoholic gasps, for “a dime fer a cuppa coffee.”

Nanny tucked the statue beneath his arm and extended a handful of coins. The old one scraped them from his palm, and muttered his gratitude. The sour breath of the bum crawled into Nanny's nostrils and made his stomach bubble, and he was glad when it had disappeared into the darkness behind him.

The statue grew colder and heavier with each step. He shifted it from hand to hand, and tried, in vain, to stuff it into his coat pocket. Finally, in disgust, he threw it into the gutter, and staggered on.

The bar, except for a bartender in a greasy apron, was deserted, and Nanny slumped into a booth at the rear. When he had ordered, and had tasted his drink, he lit a cigarette. He felt better now—

much better. After all, this was his big night. It wasn't every night a fella walked off with top honors from the American News Association. He was the best newspaper man in the country. Hadn't they given him a gold statue and applauded when he made a speech? "For discovering, and relating the best news story of the year," that's what the statue said.

He remembered the morning it happened. He had been sitting it out at the police station, waiting for something to break for the noon edition, when the phone rang. The city had been quiet, and the city editor wanted filler for the front page. Well, there was nothing he could do about it, but hope.

Ed Kennedy had come in to check the reports, and kidded him about the lack of activity. He would never forget how mad he had got at Ed.

"Fifty to five a headliner breaks within the next five minutes," he had wagered. And it was a bet. He'd get a story if he had to make one. The thought of creating a story excited him. He had never created anything in his life — God what a joke on Kennedy if he could manufacture a headline. He sprang from his chair and ferreted out the preceding night's reports, all routine reports, but maybe somewhere, somewhere in one of those reports, a peculiarity existed that could be expanded into a story. Twenty, car thirty-five had arrested a holdup man; eleven-twelve, car six had arrested one on a drunken driving charge; one-thirty-three, car five had apprehended a burglar at — that was it!

The noon edition had carried a blazing banner, "Boy Bandit Caught," and beneath the headline, under his by-line,

there unfolded the heart rending tale of how a youthful bandit had attempted to purloin an aged matron's savings. It had been a lot of work, but he had done it. The story told of how the mentally warped man had returned from the service with the din of battle still in his ears; how his lust for excitement, and cruel, sadistic mind had led him to victimize a helpless old lady. Oh, it was a honey! The hours Nanny had spent, digging into the kid's past for records of school truancies and tales of childhood mischief. All of it was in the story.

How was he to know that public resentment would demand the full penalty for the kid's crime? How was he to know that the boy would become frightened and try to escape on the day of his judgement?

He took another drink, and motioned the bartender to bring another full one.

How could he know that a faulty court-house step would cause a policeman who pursued the boy to fall and fracture his skull? Was it his fault that the boy had been charged with manslaughter, and faced the death penalty?

The bartender brought a fresh drink, and Nanny swallowed it. He thought of the statue again, and the lonely feeling came back. It was worse than ever now. It was almost stifling. He wanted to forget the statue, and the whiteshirted men; he wanted to talk to the bartender, but the bartender had gone into the back room. The front door swang open, and he turned to speak to the stranger.

The old bum of the doorway, shuffled up to him.

"Ya musta lost this, buddy," he said, as he pressed the gold statue into Nanny's hands.