

The Law's an Ass

Richard Connell

Fleer killed Siddon at seven, Saturday night. At seven-thirty Fleer entered a restaurant, ate a hearty dinner, and then went home and slept soundly.

When he woke Sunday morning the thought that he was a murderer did not in the least disturb Fleer. He was very much more interested in the thought that he was about to become a millionaire. He had had no venom against Siddon. His had not been a crime of passion. It had been purely a business murder. Siddon had stood between him and a million dollars, so he had removed Siddon. He had done it neatly and efficiently and there wasn't a chance that the crime would ever be laid at his door. As there was no need to worry, Fleer, who enjoyed the reputation of being a sensible man, did not worry. As for the law—

The law's an ass," he said, aloud, and chuckled. Fleer was a lawyer.

As he ate a leisurely breakfast, Fleer ran his eyes over the automobile advertisements in the Sunday newspapers. Now he could get rid of his middle-aged, middle-class car and buy himself one of those huge, luxurious motors he had coveted. He could stock his cellar with the real pre-war stuff, instead of the dubious synthetic mixtures he had had to be content with. He could get himself elected a director of the First National Bank. He could do many things with a million dollars. He smiled at the life of ease and power that a simple act had won for him.

With perfectly steady hands he turned to the news columns of his newspaper and read, without any emotion but satisfaction, the story of the murder he had committed:

"The body of Harris D. Siddon, well-known real-estate man, was found in the dining-room of his home, No. 19 Eastman Road, last night. Coroner Andrew Boylan states that Mr. Siddon died as a result of drinking bad liquor. A bottle, half-full of whisky, stood on the table in the room where Mr. Siddon's body was found by his cook, Mrs. Hannah Olsen, when she returned home at eleven o'clock Saturday night. Coroner Boylan examined this whisky and states that it contains wood alcohol.

"Mr. Siddon was something of a recluse and had the reputation of being wealthy. Mrs. Olsen, his cook, said that he seemed in good health when she left him, just after dinner, to go out to church.

It was his practice, she said, to sit in the dining-room after dinner, and drink two or three highballs. She did not know where he procured the liquor, she declared. The bottle containing the liquor that poisoned Mr. Siddon was a plain one, and Coroner Boylan says that he believes that

it will be practically impossible to trace it to its source.

“Mr. Siddon was sixty-three years old, and—”

Fleer did not read the rest of the story. Where Siddon was born, and educated, and what lodge he belonged to did not interest him. He turned to the editorial page and found what he had expected to find.

“The sad fate of Harris D. Siddon should be a warning to all who gamble with their lives by drinking liquor these days.....”

Fleer poured himself a second cup of coffee. He was thinking not of Siddon as he had last seen him, lying there on the floor, but of the new eight-cylinder car he would buy.

Presently, however, he found himself running over the events of the night before. His recapitulation reassured him. The police and the press had already accepted Siddon's death as one of the all-too-common cases of poisoning by bad liquor. The public would not question this verdict. This was exactly as Fleer had calculated.

He had decided some weeks before that Siddon must be put out of the way. So he had eliminated him as casually and yet as carefully as an artist erases a line that does not belong in his picture. Siddon knew too much; that was all he had against Siddon. Siddon knew that the K. G. and V. Railroad was going to build a new station in High Street, and he was the only man who did know it except the highest officials of the railroad, and Fleer. Siddon was a close-mouthed old fellow who worked alone, and, if possible, in the dark. He had already begun to get options on key pieces of property that the railroad would have to have, and, when the time came, would have to pay for, and pay for handsomely. That had been Fleer's plan, too. If he could work it out alone there would be a profit of a million dollars, possibly more, in it for him. But with Siddon in the field, he had no chance. Therefore, Siddon had to be removed from the field.

Fleer, in his mind, reënacted what he had done. As soon as he had seen Siddon's cook leave the gloomy old house, girdled and darkened by pine trees, on a lonely road just outside the city, Fleer had gone briskly up the path and rung the doorbell. Siddon had greeted him without warmth, but without suspicion. Siddon did not know that Fleer knew. They had done some business in the past, so, when Fleer said he had come to talk about a mortgage for one of his clients, Siddon had invited him into the austere dining-room, with its dingy panels and heavy velvet curtains, and it had been a very simple matter for Fleer to suggest after they had drunk one highball made with Siddon's whisky, that Siddon should try some of the whisky from the bottle Fleer had brought with him.

“You've got the reputation of being a very good judge of rye, Mr. Siddon,” Fleer had said,

uttering a compliment he knew few men are able to resist.

It had been a simple matter for Fler to empty his own glass of the poisoned liquor on the floor while Siddon was adjusting his spectacles and peering around among the legal papers on the table. Fler had made the poisoned liquor himself; it contained something even more deadly than wood alcohol.

He remembered how, in the light of the old-fashioned gas chandelier, Siddon's face had gone a chalky white, and then taken on a bluish tinge, how the man had tried to stand up, had tried to speak, only to have the words strangle in his throat. He remembered how Siddon had sunk down on the floor, and then after a few feeble, convulsive movements, had lain still. The Fler had collected the papers he had brought with him, and had walked out of the house and down the path.

They were talking about Siddon's death in the corridors of the Lawyers' Building when Fler came down to his office Monday morning, freshly shaved, smartly dressed, jaunty.

"Hear about old Siddon?" asked Harwood of Fler.

"Yes; read it in the paper. Too bad," said Fler.

"Looks sort of funny to me," remarked Harwood.

"What do you mean?" queried Fler, almost sharply.

"Well," said Harwood, "everybody knows that Siddon was the most cautious old bird that ever foreclosed a mortgage. He wasn't the sort of chap to buy doubtful liquor. He'd been drinking rye for forty years and he had an educated taste. It's mighty strange that he should take a drink of stuff that would have given an elephant the screaming minnies. I can't understand it. And another thing—"

"What?"

"Wood alcohol doesn't ordinarily knock a man cold like that. That stuff laid him out as if it had been a bolt of lightning. I bet an autopsy would show something."

"Rot, Harwood," said Fler. "You criminal lawyers smell mystery in everything. The poor old fellow simply had bad luck, that's all. When a fellow is as old as Siddon, and has been punishing the stuff all his life and probably has cast-iron arteries, it doesn't take much to put him out. I suppose you think that some beautiful adventuress in a red dress slipped Siddon knockout drops to steal the Russian crown jewels he had in his safe, or something like that."

Harwood laughed, then said, seriously:

“Well, there were a number of folks in this city who had no reason to love Siddon.”

Fleer gave the other man a quick look.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Oh, any man who has made a lot of money has enemies, especially if he’s made it in mortgages and real-estate. I guess Siddon had his share.”

“You don’t think,” inquired Fleer, “that this is a case of murder?”

“Oh, no. The chances are heavily in favor of the coroner’s verdict being correct. In a sense, though, I guess you could call it murder.”

“What do you mean, Harwood?”

In spite of himself, Fleer grew tense.

“Oh, no jury will ever even indict the man who did it.”

“The man who did it? I don’t get you,” snapped Fleer. “You talk as if you knew the man.”

“Well, I’m not unacquainted with him,” replied Harwood, with a grin. “His name is John Barleycorn.”

Fleer grinned too, then.

“I’ve met him,” he said. He wanted to get away from Harwood. The criminal lawyer, was, however, in the mood for gossip.

“If some enemy of Siddon,” remarked Harwood, “did do the job, I’ll say it was a devilish clever piece of work. The law can’t touch him.”

“The law’s an ass,” said Fleer, smiling.

“Yes,” agreed Harwood, “I’m afraid it is. And sometimes I think that justice is not only blind, but deaf and dumb.”

“So do I,” said Fleer, and went, whistling, into his office.

When the time came for Fler to hold up the K. G. and V. Railroad, he did so without any compunction. In vain did the attorneys for the railroad storm and threaten.

“This is a pretty high-handed business you’re trying to get away with, Mr. Fler,” declared the chief counsel for the railroad. “The law—”

“The law,” finished Fler, gently, “is an ass.”

It developed that the railroad was not in a position to disprove the asininity of the law, and Fler left a warm, but from his point of view, entirely enjoyable conference, with a check for something more than a million dollars in his inside pocket.

Within a month Fler had attained two of his ambitions. He owned the finest automobile money could buy, a powerful maroon monster with his initials tatooed on the doors, and he was elected a director of the First National Bank. He began to give liberally to local charities, and to put on weight. He was referred to in the newspapers as a prominent citizen, was appointed to honorary committees, and there was even some talk of nominating him for mayor. He became expansive, and his manner more gracious, and people began to forget that not so long ago he had been a down-at-the-heel lawyer with a small and dubious practice among minor money-lenders and not inordinately scrupulous promoters.

The second most exclusive country club in the community received him into its membership.

“A good shrewd, fellow, but generous:” that was the rating he had won for himself. No one spoke of Siddon any more. Six months after his death, Siddon was as completely forgotten as if he had been dead six centuries. No one thought of him; Fler, particularly, never thought of him.

Fler proved a valuable addition to the directorate of the First National Bank. He was such a sensible fellow, with a sharp eye for profit, and a direct, businesslike way of approaching delicate questions of banking. There was that question of financing the new glass works, for example. Old Judge McDonald, the counsel for the bank, wore a square-topped derby hat and square-toed shoes with elastic sides, and some of the younger directors regarded him as unduly conservative. It was Judge McDonald’s opinion that for the First National Bank to finance the glass company would be an undertaking not strictly sound from a legal point of view.

“It’s possible,” said Judge McDonald. “Doubtless we could do it, or as some people might put it, get away with it. But this institution has not been in the habit of getting away with things. If, for example, the minority stockholders should bring suit, the law—”

Fleer interrupted him.

“Let’s not worry about the law, Judge,” said Fleer. “The law’s an ass.”

The younger directors sided with Fleer; the glass company was financed; the law gave a complete demonstration that Fleer had accurately described it, and the bank made a very substantial profit on the transaction. When Judge McDonald resigned, Fleer became the bank’s legal adviser. Thanks to his daring, but always canny, advice, the First National prospered as it had never prospered before. And with it, Fleer prospered.

Judge McDonald had tried to make trouble for the bank, after he left it.

“The old fellow seems to be a little touched in the head,” Fleer said at a directors’ meeting. “I always thought he was a meticulous old woman, but now I think he’s nothing more than a public nuisance. He ought to be abated.”

“No wonder you think so after the suggestions he’s been making about you and the K. G. and V. Railroad station options,” said one of the directors.

“Oh, let the old fool rant,” said Fleer, blandly. “The law can’t do anything to a man merely for being a little smarter than a railroad.”

His tone was playful, but there was no playfulness in his eyes.

“At the club the other night,” went on the director, “Judge McDonald is said to have said that he’d like to see you in jail, Fleer.”

Fleer joined in their laughter.

“I’d like to see him in hell,” he said. Then he added: “If that old busybody doesn’t cut out his loose talk, one of these days something unpleasant is going to happen to him.”

The next Sunday was a tranquil, sunlit day, and Fleer decided to go out for a ride in his car. He liked the feeling of power it gave him to hear the steady throb of the expensive motor, to feel the metal giant respond to his touch. He liked the sense of success it gave him to see pedestrians with respectful or envious eyes watch him pass. He bowled along past the deserted house where Siddon had lived, without giving it a glance, or a thought. He headed for the open country. The sweet cool air brushed his cheeks as he raced along, and he drew it into his lungs. He had never felt so completely at peace with the world. He smiled. Life

had been good to him.

As he neared a clump of woods he slowed down because the road was bad. He'd have to have the proper authorities do something about that road; a man like him should not be compelled to slow down. Something off the road, beyond the stone wall, caught Flear's eye, and he stopped the car. He thought it was a fallen scarecrow, at first. But as he looked more closely, he saw something that made him climb the stone wall. As he drew near the object, he gave a low whistle of surprise. It was the body of a man.

The man was lying on his face, and Flear bent over and raised his head. Shock made him loose his hold. The dead man was Judge McDonald, and he had been shot through the head. When he let the body fall, something bright had been shaken loose from the dead man's nerveless grasp. Flear picked it up. It was an old pearl-handled revolver.

"Suicide," cried Flear.

Far down the road he heard the faint tinny put-put of a cheap car. Quickly Flear replaced the revolver by the dead man's hand, vaulted the stone wall, got into his own car, and shot away down the road.

He had had a particularly enjoyable drive. His blood was tingling and his appetite excellent as he sat down to dinner in the new house he had bought. Yamada had cooked an especially good dinner. Flear was enjoying the thick red filet of beef, and the new peas, and, most of all, the glass of Orvieto. It had cost him a hundred and twenty a case—this sweet, pungent wine from the hills of Tuscany—but it was worth it, he reflected as he refilled his glass.

"Gemmen to see you," announced the Japanese houseman.

"Tell him to wait till I've finished my dinner," said Flear. He looked up and saw that a stocky man had followed the servant into the room.

"Sorry to butt in at dinner time," said the stocky man, "but I got to. The District Attorney wants to see you down at his office."

"See me?" Flear demanded. "What about?"

"The murder of Judge McDonald," said the stocky man.

"But this is ridiculous," Flear said, more than once, during his trial. "Do you think a man of any sense would shoot a man down like that? This is ridiculous, I tell you." The District

Attorney continued, nevertheless, to spin his web. A director of the bank was forced to testify that Fleer had said that he'd like to see the dead man in hell, that he had said that "something unpleasant would happen to Judge McDonald." The man in the automobile Fleer had heard down the road that Sunday testified that he had seen Fleer's car dart away from the scene of the tragedy. Fleer had employed the best lawyers, but they could not shake the man's testimony. He was sure it was Fleer's car; there was not another like it in the county. Under oath, Fleer told his story, then—told exactly what had happened, how he had found the body, how he had made sure Judge McDonald was dead, and how he had gone away.

"Why did you go away?" the District Attorney asked.

"To get help—to notify some one," Fleer answered.

"But you did not notify anyone," the District Attorney rapped out.

"I decided it would not be necessary," Fleer said. "The body was sure to be found very soon. There was nothing I could do. My time is valuable. I saw no good reason why I should get mixed up in the case. I did what any sensible man would have done under the circumstances."

He saw the look the District Attorney gave the jury. Fleer was getting angry. The whole business had been a joke, at first. It was annoying to find his word doubted. He'd make that young whippersnapper of a District Attorney pay for this. When he was acquitted, he'd show that young fool what it means to antagonize a man of wealth and power, a director of a big bank. And the jury—they looked like fools—they were fools.

The little green door opened slowly. A man without a collar or coat, and with the top of his head shaved, walked across the stone pavement of the silent, gray room. He paused for a second in front of the great chair, then with a quick movement sat down in it, firmly. When they asked him if he had anything to say he replied, in a clear voice that did not waver:

"I am innocent of the murder of Judge McDonald."

"Anything else?"

He muttered something. The reporters in the newspapers next morning said that the words were, "The law's an ass."

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