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EDWARD D. HOCH



THE THEFTS OF NICK VELVET

STORIES



The Thefts of Nick Velvet

Edward D. Hoch



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Introduction

NOW THAT I'VE WRITTEN thirty-four short stories about an unusual thief named Nick Velvet, perhaps it's time I said a few words about Nick's origins, and about how the original concept of a series character can undergo radical changes with the passage of time. There seems no better opportunity than this first edition of Nick's best adventures, published by The Mysterious Press.

The first Nick Velvet story, "The Theft of the Clouded Tiger," was written late in 1965 and published in the September 1966 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Two events, one personal and one literary, probably led to the series. During 1965 I'd published the first three stories of my Rand series (about a British cipher expert) in the pages of *EQMM*, and I was anxious to follow it up with a second series character created especially for that magazine. On a broader literary front, 1965 marked the peak of James Bond's popularity. The final Ian Fleming novel and the most financially successful of the Bond films (*Thunderball*) were both released that year.

As originally conceived, Nick Velvet was to have been my answer to James Bond—a moderately sophisticated thief who used all the latest gadgets to pull off unlikely robberies. A few of the gadgets slipped in—like the tranquilizer gun in that first story—but the character quickly developed into something else. Unlike Bond's cheerful girl-chasing, Nick remained faithful to Gloria, the woman with whom he lives. And after the first story, in which he dispatched the villains with the aid of a tiger, Nick rarely killed anyone.

In fact, as the objects to be stolen became more bizarre (the water from a swimming pool, a toy mouse, a baseball team, a sea serpent), I often viewed the stories as being wildly humorous. Sometimes their first drafts tended to reflect this humor in extreme amounts, and I have my editor Fred Dannay (Ellery Queen) to thank for keeping it within reasonable bounds.

A good deal of Nick's background was to spring from my initial choice of his name. I liked the sound of "Nick Velvet" and it seemed a likely name for a series character—especially a smooth thief. But to get around a certain artificiality I explained that he'd shortened his name from something longer "that sounded like a cheese." So his original name was Nicholas Velveta, and he'd become an Italian-American without any conscious design on my part. Since I wanted him to be a product of New York, I chose the Greenwich Village area as his birthplace, in an era when "the Italian-American population still dominated the section against the encroachment of the bohemians."

Nick is by nature something of a loner and even Gloria Merchant, the woman with whom he lives, has only a vague notion of his profession. In the early stories she believed him to be an industrial consultant who is away from home frequently to inspect proposed plant sites. Recently she has come to the conclusion that he performs some sort of secret government work.

In the introduction to *The Spy and the Thief* (Davis Publications, 1971), which collected some of the stories about Rand and Nick Velvet, I gave Nick's birth date as March 24, 1932. This would make him forty-five years old as I write these words, and I don't expect he'll ever age much beyond that. Spies and policemen can grow old in style, actually improving their performance, but it's hard to imagine an aging Nick Velvet.

I imagine Nick as ruggedly handsome, with black hair, brown eyes and slightly Italian features; a well built man just over six feet tall. Nick's father was active in local politics, but Nick himself was a high school dropout who joined the army at eighteen and saw action at Korea's Chongchon River (while his creator was sorting library books at Fort Slocum, N.Y.)

After the war Nick took night courses to complete his high school education, while working at a marina in Westchester County. He developed a lifelong love of boating, one of his few spare-time pleasures. Gloria, the only one who calls him Nicky, shares his love of boating. They live in a small city on Long Island Sound, close to the water, in an unpretentious house with a front porch where Nick can sometimes be found drinking a beer. The house is in an older section of the city, but there's a relatively new electronics plant at the end of the street.

Nick rarely hires anyone to help with his thefts, preferring to keep the standard \$20,000 fee for himself. Especially dangerous assignments sometimes bring \$30,000, but despite inflation Nick's prices have remained the same for twelve years. Though he sometimes poses as a reporter or writer, he generally uses his own name. Only recently has his reputation become widely known in criminal circles. Because of his Italian-American background, he has been hired more than once by various factions of the Mafia.

Though many of Nick's adventures take place in the New York area, he has also operated in Texas, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Washington, and Miami, and gone outside the country to Canada, London, Paris, Venice, Switzerland, and the Caribbean, among other places.

Since the major market for my Nick Velvet stories has always been *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, perhaps it's not too surprising that Nick should follow in the footsteps of the great Arsène Lupin in becoming something of a thief-detective. In the later stories especially, he is often called upon to solve a mystery in order to accomplish his mission or clear himself. In one story, "The Theft from the Empty Room," he had to solve a mystery in order to know what to steal!

Of course since the very beginning there has always been an element of mystery connected with Nick's adventures. Since he steals only valueless objects—never money or jewels or the like—the reader (and Nick) generally wonders how such a thing as a dinosaur's tailbone or a circus poster or a cheap cuckoo clock could possibly be worth \$20,000. In the end both Nick and the reader find out, the theft is successful, and Nick often brings a criminal to justice as well. It is mystery and crime and detection all rolled into one.

Almost from the beginning Nick Velvet has been the most popular (and most financially successful) of all my series characters. All but three of the first thirty-four stories appeared originally in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and many were also published in the British short-story magazine *Argosy* before it ceased publication early in 1974. Two stories appeared originally in *Milford Shayne Mystery Magazine* and one appeared only in the British *Argosy*. Its appearance in this volume marks its first American publication. (It was purchased for publication in this country by the Dineen Club magazine *Signature*, but when that magazine stopped using fiction all rights to the story were returned to me.)

There has been frequent television interest expressed in the Nick Velvet series, and options have been taken on the stories from time to time. The problem in the United States seems to be that Nick is after all, a thief who goes unpunished for his crimes. Television producers have pointed out to me that by way of contrast, the Robert Wagner character in the 1967 TV series *It Takes a Thief* was actually the employ of the U.S. government, which made everything all right.

Happily, French television does not worry about the moral question in Nick's adventures. Five of the Nick Velvet stories were filmed in the south of France and shown on French TV during 1976, and others may follow. On the other side of the world, a collection of Nick Velvet stories was issued in January 1976 by the Japanese publisher Hayakawa, under the title *Enter the Thief*. And individual stories in the series have been widely reprinted in England, Norway, Sweden, West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Denmark, Italy, Australia, Brazil and Japan. In this country two Velvet stories have been reprinted in *Best Detective Stories of the Year*.

The reader will find a complete bibliography of the Nick Velvet stories at the back of this book. But for those anxious to get to the stories themselves, I've kept you too long already.

A final word of thanks to Fred Dannay. He not only published most of these stories but also encouraged their writing, suggested revisions when necessary, and even inspired a few of the plots. Without him, and without *EQMM*, there would have been no Nick Velvet.

Edward D. Ho...

The Theft of the Clouded Tiger

MOSTLY HE JUST LIKED TO SIT on the front steps with a beer, watching the homebound workers from the electronics plant down the block, pleased that he wasn't one of them. Sometimes, after supper, Gloria would join him on the steps to see the neighborhood fathers playing ball with their boys in the lot across the street, then watch them stroll down to the corner grocery for a forgotten loaf of bread and a pack of smokes. It was a peaceful, settled neighborhood—that was why he liked it. No curious neighbors, no snooping.

“Nicky?”

“Huh?” He glanced up at Gloria, perched on the porch railing, swinging her long legs in graceful rhythm. She was a great girl, but she always wanted to talk.

“Nicky, what do you do when you go away?”

“Travel, like I told you. These companies hire me to pick new plant sites. There's a lot of money in it.” He sipped his beer from the punctured can, wishing she'd quiet down for once and let him breathe in the evening air.

“When will they send you out again, Nicky?”

“I don't know.”

“Do you think some day we'll be able to get married and settle down?”

He'd often considered marrying Gloria. Sometimes he could even imagine himself spending the rest of his life on this little street, walking up to the corner for beer in the evening. He could imagine it, but not for too long. “Some day,” he said, because that was the answer to everything.

It was later, almost ten o'clock, when the telephone rang. She brushed his hand from her thigh and rose in the darkness to answer it. “For you,” she called out.

He took the telephone and heard an unfamiliar voice ask, “Is this Nick Velvet?”

“Yes.”

“We'd like to talk to you about a job.”

“Tonight?”

“If you can come over. Foster Hotel, Room 229.”

Nick smiled at the telephone. “I don't meet people in hotel rooms. They're only for sleeping and making love.”

“All right, where?”

“The park across from the hotel. By the fountain.”

“In the dark?” the voice asked, uncertain.

“I do my best work in the dark. Eleven o'clock—and come alone.”

“How will I know you?”

Nick smiled again. "I'll know you," he said and hung up. He always knew them. They always looked the same.

Gloria came in off the porch. "Who was it, Nicky?"

"A job. Be back around midnight."

He picked up his jacket on the way out the door. Sometimes the nights were cool.

Nick Velvet was a product of New York's Greenwich Village, in an era when the Italian American population still dominated the section against the encroachment of the bohemians. He shortened his name from an original version that sounded like a cheese, and gone off to the wars with a good many other high school dropouts.

Somehow, over the years, his life's work had begun to take shape, and now—nearing 40—he was an acknowledged expert. They phoned him now, and made trips to see him, because for certain jobs he had no equal in the world.

Nick Velvet was a thief. Of a special sort.

He never stole money as such, and never stole on his own. Rather, he stole on assignment, taking the things that were too big or too dangerous or too unusual for other thieves. He'd stolen from museums, from corporations, from governments. He'd stolen a statue of the Roman god Mercury from the top of a post office building, and a stained glass window from a museum of medieval art. Once he'd even stolen a complete baseball team, including manager, coaches, and equipment.

It wasn't so much that he liked the work, or had planned it as a career. But when it happened he had voiced no complaints. The fees were substantial, and he worked only four or five times a year, for no more than a week or so at a time. He saw a good deal of the world, and he met some highly interesting people.

Harry Smith was not one of the most interesting.

He stood in the shadows by the fountain, looking for all the world like a gangster of the prohibition era waiting for the boat from Canada. Nick didn't like his looks, and when he said his name was Smith, Nick didn't like his name, either.

"A man in Chicago recommended you, Velvet," Smith said, clipping off the words like a man with an electric typewriter.

"Could be. What do you want?"

"Do we have to talk here? I have a hotel room."

Nick Velvet smiled. "Hotel rooms can be bugged too easily. I don't like tape recordings of my business deals."

Harry Smith shrugged. "Hell, these days they can bug you anywhere. They could be aiming one of them long-range things at us right now."

"That's why we're standing by the fountain. It's quite effective for covering up conversation."

Now get to the point.”

Harry Smith stepped into the circle of light cast by a tree-shrouded lamp overhead. He was a bulky man, built like a small gorilla, and both cheeks were pockmarked. “We want you to steal something,” he said.

“I assumed as much. My price is high.”

“How high?”

“Twenty thousand and up, depending on the job.”

Harry Smith took a step backward into the shadows. “We want you to steal a tiger from a zoo.”

Nick had learned a long time ago to control his reactions. He simply nodded and said, “Tell me about it.”

“It’s in the city—the Glen Park Zoo. Something called a ‘clouded’ tiger. Supposed to be rare.”

“How rare?”

The man shrugged, and Nick was somehow reminded of a gorilla again. “A Middle Eastern prince with a private zoo is willing to pay well for the beast. We can afford your twenty thousand.”

“Thirty for animals,” Nick told him. “There is more danger involved.”

“I’ll have to ask the others.”

“Do that. You know where to reach me.”

“Wait!” Harry Smith grabbed Nick’s shoulder. “We want to do this thing in three days—on Monday morning. We should decide tonight.”

“I’d have to look the zoo over first.”

“You’d have tomorrow and Sunday for that.”

“Thirty thousand?”

The man hesitated a moment longer. “All right. Five in advance.”

They shook hands on it, and Nick Velvet went back to Gloria’s to pack his bag. The night was hesitant with the beginnings of an overcast, and above his head the stars were gradually going out.

There were three of them—Harry Smith, and a tall slim Englishman named Cormick, and a youngish blonde girl who answered to Jeanie. The girl seemed to be with Cormick, and it was obvious that the Englishman was the brains of the operation. He ordered Harry Smith around in the flat monotone so often used for servants.

“I’ll need to look the place over,” Nick told them again.

Cormick shrugged his lean shoulders. “Look all you want.”

“Why does it have to be Monday morning?”

“You’re not paid to ask questions, Mr. Velvet.”

They’d left the hotel room and were sitting now in a little house trailer hooked on behind a new black convertible. The car and trailer, like the girl, belonged to Cormick.

“Tell me something about the tiger,” Nick said, sipping a glass of warm Scotch.

Cormick might have been lecturing a class in Zoology I. “Though the ordinary tiger is quite common in zoos, there are a number of rare specimens that are highly valued. The great heavy-coated Siberian tiger is an extremely rare zoo specimen, as is the albino tiger, and the blue-gray tiger known to parts of China. But the so-called ‘clouded’ tiger—a strangely mottled beast long thought to be legendary—is perhaps the rarest of all. This specimen was captured near the Sino-Indian border a few years ago and donated to the Glen Park Zoo. It may be the only one in captivity, and our prince will pay dearly for it.”

“I’ll need some equipment.”

The Englishman nodded. “We have a small closed pickup truck, and Jeanie can be your driver. The job is to get the tiger out of its cage and into the truck, and then to get the truck away from the zoo.”

Nick lit a cigarette. “Is the zoo guarded?”

Cormick nodded. “They’ve got a squad of private patrolmen, mainly to keep the teenagers in line. I understand they had some trouble last year with the animals being annoyed.”

“Protecting the animals from the people.” Nick chuckled for the first time and began to relax. The old feeling of success was beginning to course through his veins. He never liked them to seem too easy. Then, as if he’d just thought of it, he said, “I’d better take Jeanie with me in the morning. A man alone at the zoo might look suspicious.”

Cormick hesitated only a moment before indicating his approval with a wave of his hand. “If you wish. It might be a good idea, since she’ll be with you Monday.”

“Where will you two be?” Nick asked.

“Here in the trailer, waiting for you. We have a plane waiting to fly the beast to Canada and then on to the Middle East.”

“You’ll have trouble getting a tiger out of the country,” Nick said. “How are you planning to do it?”

Cormick merely smiled. “Do I ask you how you plan to steal him in the first place?”

Nick took out another cigarette. “I’m glad you don’t. At this point I have no idea how I’m going to do it.”

Saturday morning was breezy, with high white clouds that glided swiftly across the sun in an irregular formation. Nick helped Jeanie from her car and guided her around a puddle left over from an early morning shower. It was a day for the zoo, and even this early the parking lot was beginning to fill.

Nick dropped two quarters in the turnstile and they passed through. “I can remember when city zoos were free,” he commented.

“They still are, in smaller cities. Here they have to pay for guards.” She motioned toward a uniformed man standing near the polar bears. There was a revolver on his hip, and he wore the square silver badge of a local security service.

“Do they need to carry those guns?”

Jeanie shrugged. “Probably not loaded.”

“We’ll assume they are. Where’s this clouded tiger?”

“Down this way. Let’s stop in the monkey house first, in case the guard is watching.”

She was a smart girl, with brains that even showed through the blonde hair and the long-legged fullness of her body. He liked being with her, even at the zoo. Even in the monkey house.

After a time they drifted toward the big cats, while Nick carefully observed the zoo’s routine—truckful of dirt coming through a service gate in the fence, a keeper hosing down the concrete near the seals, an aging vendor inflating balloons from a tank of gas. Something back near the front gate caught Nick’s eye and he asked, “What’s the armored car for?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Picking up yesterday’s haul of quarters.”

“Quarters are money.”

“Forget it. On a good weekend they’re lucky to get two or three thousand dollars. We’re after big game.”

He paused in front of the cage they sought. “It’s big, all right.”

The clouded tiger was a massive, mocking beast with mottled fur unlike anything Nick had ever seen. The animal paced its cage with a vibrant stride that seemed to shout its superiority, even over the lion and the more orthodox tiger in the adjoining cages. It was not a beast to meet on a dark night near the Sino-Indian border; it was not even a beast to meet on a sunny Saturday afternoon at the zoo.

“I don’t like him.” Jeanie shuddered. “He looks as if he could pounce right through those bars.”

“Maybe he could. My job is to get him through, somehow.”

“Cormick is crazy! Who ever heard of stealing a tiger from a zoo?”

Nick smiled. “I’ve stolen stranger things—ten tons of slot machines, once.” But his eyes were busy. The cages all had connecting gates, but the ones on either side of the clouded tiger were heavily bolted. A door in the rear wall led into the beast’s den, and the only other exit was a small gate at the front of the cage, for feeding and cleaning purposes. He studied the padlocked chain on the gate and decided it would present no problem.

“Seen enough, Nick?” she asked him finally.

“I guess so.”

They strolled down by the camels and then stood for a time watching a shaggy old bison who almost seemed to realize it was one of the last. The animal depressed Nick, and he was glad to get back to the car.

Cormick was pouring drinks when they returned to the trailer. He smiled and held out a glass for Nick. "I thought you might have the tiger with you."

"I thought you wanted it on Monday."

Harry Smith settled into a chair. "That's right—Monday morning at a quarter to ten."

"Why such close timing?"

The Englishman sipped his drink. "We've made arrangements for the plane at that time. Can you get the tiger then?"

"It would be easier at night," Nick said.

"Not with those guards around. You'd never get by the front entrance. At least in the daytime you can walk right up to the cage without attracting attention."

Nick leaned against the wall, eyeing Jeanie's long legs as she settled into a chair. "Sometimes isn't all bad, attracting attention. Now tell me your plans for after I get the tiger."

"Jeanie will be driving the pickup truck," Cormick said. "She'll follow your orders until you're away from the zoo, then she'll drive you to the meeting place. We'll pay you the rest of the money there and take over the truck. It's our job to get the animal on the plane for Canada."

"Will that truck hold the tiger?"

"Steel sheeting with a few air holes. It will hold him."

Nick Velvet nodded. "I have to pick up a few things. Be back before dark."

He borrowed Jeanie's car and drove to the city—to a laboratory supply house that happened to be open on a Saturday afternoon. There he purchased an ugly-looking pellet gun that fired tranquilizing darts. Just in case the tiger got nasty about its kidnaping ...

On Sunday afternoon Nick went back to the zoo with Jeanie because he wanted to study the keepers' uniforms. And, incidentally, because he wanted to study Jeanie. "How did you meet Cormick?" he asked as they strolled near the reptile house.

"How do those things ever happen? I was a dancer in a little off-Broadway musical, with dreams of doing my own choreography some day. He said he'd help—invest some money."

"Did he?"

"After this job, he says. It's always after just one more job. But he's not a bad guy. He kept Harry in his place."

"How long have the three of you been together?"

"About a year. Harry had a girl for a while, but she took off. He used to beat her, and she didn't like it."

"How did Cormick hear about me?"

She turned to smile at him. "You're famous in certain circles, Nick Velvet. But I never thought you'd be so handsome."

Nick was no matinee idol and he knew it. He stopped looking at her legs and started to worry. "Let's go back," he suggested.

On the way out he stopped at the balloon vendor's stand and purchased two balloons, a blue one and a red one. The blue one he gave to Jeanie, but he released the red one and watched its progress as it rose with the slight breeze. He watched it for quite a long time, and then they left.

Monday dawned rainy, and Nick cursed his luck. He was about to suggest a postponement, but by eight o'clock the sky was beginning to brighten and the rain had settled into a drizzle.

They met for a final conference in the trailer and Cormick shook his hand.

"Good luck, Nick. The rest of the money will be waiting for you."

"Can't you tell me where you'll be?"

"Jeanie knows. We'll see you this afternoon."

Nick dressed quickly in a close approximation of the work clothes worn by the keepers. Then he followed Jeanie in the truck while she parked her car at a suburban shopping center.

"All right, boss," she said, getting behind the wheel of the truck. "What are my orders?"

"The service gate will be open. We'll drive in there and then I'll leave you. From there you can see the tiger's cage, and as soon as I reach it you start driving toward it, slowly. You'll have to turn the truck around and back up to the railing outside the cage. That'll be the tricky part."

"What will the guards be doing all this time?"

He told her.

"You're quite a guy, Nick Velvet. Will it work?"

"If it doesn't, I'll have a lapful of clouded tiger."

"Should we buy another balloon, just to make sure?"

He studied the sky for a moment, watching the progress of fluffy white clouds. "No, the wind direction is about the same as yesterday." He checked the bulges in his various pockets, and decided the two of them were ready.

As Jeanie drove the truck slowly through the service gate, a uniformed zoo patrolman turned toward them curiously and started walking in their direction. Nick left the truck and hurried forward.

"You working here?" the patrolman called out.

"Cleaning the tiger cage."

"Huh?" The patrolman kept coming, looking puzzled.

"Somebody threw a bottle in there during the night. Broken glass." Nick hoped that the keepers hadn't already found the glass and removed it. He'd had to hurl the bottle over the fence from a distance of fifty feet, but his throwing arm was still good. It had dropped into the right cage and smashed in one corner of the clouded tiger's domain.

The patrolman turned and stared at the broken glass and the pacing tiger. "Damn fool, whoever

did that! I'll make out a report."

"The night man reported it."

"Huh? All right." He started to turn away as Nick jumped over the outer railing in front of the cage. Then, as an afterthought, the patrolman asked, "You got an identification card? I don't remember you."

"Wait till I finish this," Nick told him. "I need both hands." He shielded the padlock with his body and snapped the chain with a quick pressure of powerful wire cutters.

"What ...?"

But now the cage door was beginning to rise, and Nick hoped that Jeanie was getting the truck into position. "Stand clear, officer. We don't want an accident."

"You going to clean the cage with those wire cutters, wise guy? Who the hell are you?"

Nick brought the heavy cutters up quickly, catching the guard on the temple. He gasped and started to go down, as Nick's other hand pulled something else from his pocket.

Jeanie arrived with the truck, and was backing it into position. Somebody shouted and Nick turned to see a keeper running toward them. Far off, near the gate, another guard had turned in the other direction.

Nick paused only an instant to gauge the wind direction again, then hurled two smoke bombs at the oncoming figures.

"Nick!"

"Hurry! We've only got a minute!" He pulled a plank from the truck and laid it across the railing to the cage door. Then he tossed another smoke bomb into the cage and pulled the door open all the way.

The tiger, momentarily terrified, turned toward its den, then changed its mind and bolted out of the cage, up the plank, and into the waiting truck.

"Done!" Nick yelled, yanking out the plank and slamming shut the steel door of the pickup truck. "Let's get out!"

One of the guards had made it through the smokescreen and was pawing at his holster when the tiger heard the shots.

"Those came from the main gate," Nick said, scrambling onto the seat next to the girl. "What's going on?"

She didn't answer, but thumped hard on the accelerator, shooting the truck forward through the service gate. He'd been prepared to smash through, but the gate was still open. Behind them the patrolman fired one wild shot and then they were away.

"This truck won't be safe for long," Jeanie said.

Nick glanced out the side window as the truck roared past the zoo entrance. The armored car was there, standing at the main gate with its door open. Two uniformed men were stretched out on the

pavement near it.

“Never mind the truck,” Nick growled. “What about that?”

“What?”

“You know damn well what! Your friends have played me for a prize patsy!”

She spun the steering wheel like an expert, cutting off suddenly onto a side road. It was dusty and bumpy, and almost at once the tiger started to growl.

“You’re getting paid,” she told him. “Stop complaining.”

“Cormick didn’t want the tiger at all! You didn’t even care if I got it. The whole thing was just a diversion while Cormick and Smith knocked off the armored car.”

“I didn’t know there’d be any shooting,” she said, keeping her eyes on the road.

“If the guards caught me you’d have left me there. Did you do all this for a few thousand dollars in quarters?”

She snorted in disdain. “Use your head, Nick. The armored car stops at branch banks on its Monday morning run. With any luck we’ve got close to a million bucks!”

“They waited inside the zoo, jumped the armored car men, and took their keys. Both armored car men came into the zoo?”

“They always did,” she told him. “They figured it was a safe stop, like a church. All we had to do was distract the zoo guards somehow. That’s where you came in.”

“And I also make a good fall guy for the cops to chase.”

“I’m sorry, Nick.” Behind them the tiger roared again.

“I’ll bet you are! You just came along to keep me on schedule.”

“That’s about it. I’m leaving you with the truck and this damned tiger and taking my car.”

“Where are you meeting them?”

“Sorry, Nick. You’re not making the trip.”

He reached past her leg and switched off the ignition. The truck shuddered and rolled to a stop on the narrow dirt road. “Tell me,” he ordered.

Jeanie yanked open the door on her side and began to run as soon as she hit the dirt. He sprang after her, and she turned quickly, her hand coming out of her shoulder bag.

“I can take care of myself, Nick,” she said, swinging a tiny pistol toward his stomach.

“You crazy fool!” His own hand had moved almost as fast—to the pellet gun he carried in his bulky side pocket. He dropped to his knees and squeezed the trigger, putting a tranquilizer dart in the wrist of her gun hand a split second before she fired.

Nick left her sleeping in a field and drove the truck to the shopping center where she’d left the car. Already the news of the robbery was on the radio, and he listened with a kind of fogginess and indifference.

“Two armored car guards were slain this morning in a daring holdup at the Glen Park Zoo. The zoo’s patrolmen, distracted by the theft of a tiger from its cage, were unable to assist the armored car personnel. The two masked gunmen escaped with an estimated seven hundred thousand dollars, while another man and a girl were stealing the tiger. The missing beast—a rare clouded variety—described as being extremely dangerous.”

Nick switched off the radio as he turned into the shopping center, then changed his mind and turned up some loud music. The tiger was beginning to growl again. Nick wondered if there might really be a prince willing to pay \$30,000 for the animal.

He found a road map in the glove compartment of Jeanie’s car, and studied it carefully. Four circles had been drawn with pencil. He frowned and thought about it. Cormick and Smith wouldn’t be near the zoo, or the airport, or the last place he’d seen the trailer. That left only one logical circle, and he decided to chance it.

“Say, mister,” somebody called as he went back to the truck, “you got an animal in there?”

He smiled at the man. “My dog. He’s a big fellow.”

“Sounds like it.”

Nick was still smiling as he wheeled the truck onto the highway. He hoped he wouldn’t have to use the tranquilizer gun again.

There was a trailer camp where the circle had been drawn on the map, but Cormick and Smith were not there. Nick parked the truck in some nearby woods and waited. It was almost dark before they pulled in, near the edge of the camp. Nick smiled for the first time in hours.

When it was dark he slowly backed the truck against the side of the trailer and got out. “What hell’s that growling?” he heard Harry Smith ask from inside. Nick unlocked the back of the truck.

It was Cormick who opened the trailer door, pistol in hand. “Who’s there? That you, Jeanie?”

“One tiger, as ordered, Cormick.”

“Velvet!”

“Hungry and mean, but in good condition.” Nick opened the back door of the truck.

The tiger leaped for the lighted trailer and made it to Cormick in a single bound. Behind him Harry Smith started to scream.

Afterward, Nick used the tranquilizer gun on the tiger and then scooped up the loot of the holdup. He pushed through a gathering crowd of frightened spectators and drove away as the first police car was coming down the road ...

Nick Velvet stopped at the corner grocery for a six-pack of cold beer. He walked slowly, enjoying the feel of the warm evening, until he came in sight of the house and saw Gloria waiting for him on the porch. Then he smiled and started walking faster.

“Hello, Nicky,” she said. “Home to stay?”

“For a while,” he answered, and opened a couple of beers.

The Theft from the Onyx Pool

“YOU STEAL THINGS, DON’T you?”

Nick Velvet regarded her with a slight smile. “Only the hearts of beautiful maidens.”

“No, seriously. I can pay.”

“Seriously. What do you want stolen?”

“The water from a swimming pool.”

He continued smiling at her, but a portion of his mind wished he were back on the front porch with Gloria and a cold beer. The habits of the very rich had never been for him. “I could always pull the plug,” he suggested, still smiling.

The girl, whose name was Asher Dumont, ground out her cigarette with a gesture of angry irritation. “Look, Mr. Velvet, I didn’t arrange to have you invited here so we could trade small talk. I happen to know that you steal unusual things, unique things, and that your fee is \$20,000. Correct?”

“All right,” he told her, playing along. “I don’t know exactly how you came upon this information in your circle, but I’ll admit it’s reasonably accurate, Miss Dumont.”

“Then will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Steal the water from Samuel Fitzpatrick’s pool?”

Nick Velvet had been approached by many people during his career, and as his peculiar reputation had grown, he’d been hired to steal many curious things. He’d once stolen a tiger from a zoo, and a stained-glass window from a museum. His fee for such odd thefts was a flat \$20,000, with an extra \$10,000 for especially hazardous tasks. He never stole money, or the obvious valuables that other thieves went after. He dealt only in the unusual, often in the bizarre—but in his field he was the best in the business.

“That’s a peculiar assignment even for me,” he told the girl. She was blonde, with shoulder-length straight hair in the tradition of girl folksingers. He wouldn’t have been surprised to see her back in his old Greenwich Village neighborhood, but somehow she seemed out of place sipping cocktails at a society reception in Westchester. It was only her dress, a gleaming satin sheath, that belonged at the party—not the girl.

“I understood that you specialize in the peculiar.”

“I do. When do you want it done, and where is the place?”

She sipped her cocktail and glanced around to make certain they weren’t overheard. “Samuel Fitzpatrick has an estate twenty miles from here, in Connecticut. I’ll find an excuse to take you over there. After that you’re on your own. Only one stipulation—it must be done before next weekend holiday. Before the Fourth of July.”

“I suggested pulling the plug. That would be the easiest way. It would save you twenty thousand

“You don’t seem to understand, Mr. Velvet—I *want* the water from that pool. I want you to steal the water, all of it, and deliver it to me.”

“Is this some sort of wild bet?” he asked. He could imagine nothing else.

Asher Dumont stretched her long tanned legs under the table and drew in on her cigarette. “I understood that you were a businessman. The reason shouldn’t be important to you.”

“It’s not. I was only being inquisitive.”

“Can you come with me to the Fitzpatrick estate in the morning?”

“By the way, who is this Samuel Fitzpatrick? The name is vaguely familiar.”

“He’s a writer and producer of mysteries. Two hits on Broadway and he’s had a very successful series on television. Remember *The Dear Slayer*?”

“I don’t follow the theater as closely as I should,” Nick admitted, “but I’ve heard of Fitzpatrick. That’s all I need to know about him. It gives me a talking point.”

“Then I’ll see you in the morning, Mr. Velvet?”

“Since it’s business, Miss Dumont, I usually receive a \$5,000 retainer in advance, and the balance when I complete the assignment.”

She didn’t blink, “Very well, I’ll have it for you.” Nick left her at the table and threaded his way through the reception crowd. In the outer hall he found a phone booth and dialed Gloria’s number.

“Hi, how’re things?”

“Great, Nicky. You coming home?”

“I’ll be a while. Maybe a week. We’re checking out some new plant sites in Connecticut.”

“Oh, Nicky! You’ll be away over the Fourth!”

“Maybe not. I’ll try to be home by then. Maybe we can have a picnic or something.”

He knew that would satisfy her, and after a few more words he hung up. Often on summer nights sitting on the porch with Gloria, he’d be tempted to give it all up and take a job as a salesman or a bookkeeper. But always there was the odd invitation from somebody like Asher Dumont to get him back to work. The money was good, and he liked his “specialty.” He was a thief, and he knew he would never change.

Asher Dumont picked him up in a little white sports car that seemed hardly big enough for her lanky frame and long legs. The top was down, and her long blonde hair spun out behind her like a banner as she wheeled the car onto the parkway and headed for Connecticut.

“You didn’t tell me to dress casually,” he said, commenting on her shorts and blouse.

“Sam would be suspicious right away if he ever saw me in a dress.” She steered the car around the truck and shot the speed up to seventy. “There’s a check for \$5,000 in my purse. Take it out.”

“A check?”

“Go on, I’m not trying to get evidence against you. I don’t carry that much around in cash.”

“I’ll have to cash this before I finish the job.”

“Sure. Right now, though, tell me what kind of cover story you’ll use with Fitzpatrick. I’ll introduce you as someone interested in his plays.”

“Better fill me in on the sort of thing he likes to produce.”

As she talked he had the distinct impression she was merely a rich girl indulging in a game. Her business associates were more often shady gang figures or nervous diplomats, the people who could afford to hire Nick Velvet. He didn’t know if he liked it, but she was nice to look at and besides, he had never been commissioned to steal the water from a swimming pool.

Samuel Fitzpatrick’s estate was actually a generous-sized house with a double garage, situated on the edge of a gently rolling field of scrub brush and young trees. Nick looked out across the low stone walls and open fields and wondered if people still went fox hunting in country like this.

Asher didn’t bother with the doorbell, but took Nick around the back to a flagstone patio which led to a fenced-in swimming pool. A middle-aged man with thinning hair and a tanned, weathered face opened the gate to meet them. “Well, Asher! You’re more lovely every day.”

“Thanks, Sam,” she said, bestowing a quick kiss on his cheek. “This is the man I told you about on the phone—Nick Velvet.”

“Velvet?” Fitzpatrick extended his freckled hand. “Glad to meet you.”

He led them through the wooden gate to the pool. It was a medium-sized one as such things went with a shallow end for wading and a deep end with a springy diving board. There was a woman in the pool, swimming with a powerful breast stroke, but Nick couldn’t see her face at the moment.

“Nice place you have here,” Nick observed.

“I like privacy. Nearest neighbor’s more than a mile down the road.”

“This is quite a pool.” Nick had been drawn to the edge, noticing the way the smooth edge glistened in layers of multiple colors. It was like marble or quartz, but cut through to show the layers of black and white, with sometimes just a hint of red or brown. “What’s this edge made of?”

“Onyx. My first big play on Broadway was *The Onyx Ring*. The pool is one of my few luxuries.”

Nick was beginning to understand. With the water out of the pool something might be done to remove these onyx layers from the edge. He wondered if Asher Dumont had a poor boy friend lurking somewhere offstage.

The woman climbed out of the water, feeling for an oversized bath towel. Her figure was still good, but Nick knew she’d never see forty again. Asher made the introductions. “Nick, this is Sam’s wife, Lydia. This is a friend, Nick Velvet, Lydia.”

The woman squinted and groped on the poolside table for her glasses. “I’m blind without them,” she explained. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Velvet. Lovely weather, isn’t it?”

“Certainly is,” Nick agreed, sinking into the red-and-green chair that Fitzpatrick had indicated

He was studying the rear of the house, and the street beyond where no traffic seemed to pass. An idea was beginning to shape itself in his mind.

“Let me get drinks for us,” Lydia Fitzpatrick offered, blinking from behind her thick glasses.

“Fine idea,” her husband said. Then, “Now, what did you want to see me about, Mr. Velvet?”

“I admired your plays,” Nick said, playing with the plastic webbing of his chair. “Especially *The Dear Slayer*. Quite a tricky ending,”

Fitzpatrick leaned back in his own chair and stroked his thinning hair. “That’s what you need for Broadway, a trick ending.”

“I have a plot that might interest you,” Nick told him. “It’s never been done before.”

“You’re a writer?”

“No, that’s why Asher suggested I come to you.”

The producer smiled slightly, as if he’d heard it all before. Lydia returned with drinks and settled to the ground at her husband’s side. “I get a lot of people with ideas,” Fitzpatrick said. “Usually I don’t even like to listen to them. But I’ll make an exception since you’re a friend of Asher’s. This guy is like a daughter to me.” He reached out to take her hand and she smiled as if on cue.

Nick sipped his drink. “Well, it’s a locked-room sort of thing.”

“Locked rooms are a bit old-fashioned for Broadway.”

“Not this one!” Nick hoped he was conveying the proper enthusiasm. “Listen. A man is murdered in a completely locked room. The doors and windows are all sealed and there’s no secret passage.”

“A locked room is difficult to bring off on the stage, when one whole wall is always open to the audience. But go on—how’s it done?”

Nick leaned back and grinned. “There’s a type of laser beam that can pass through a transparent surface without damaging it. The killer fires the beam through the closed and sealed window, murders the man inside, and yet the room remains completely locked.”

Fitzpatrick nodded in admiration. “Not bad. Not bad at all, but I think it would go better in print than on the stage. If I were still doing the television series I might give it a try—I’ve always liked wild things like that, the wilder the better.”

Nick stood up and strolled slowly along the edge of the pool as he talked, and once he managed to slip in a question on the pool’s depth, directed to Mrs. Fitzpatrick. The slanting bottom made it difficult to figure exactly, but he thought the pool probably held close to 19,000 gallons of water. A big job for any thief. He knew it would take days to empty it by ordinary means.

It was nearly four when they finally left the Fitzpatricks, with Nick shaking hands and promising to keep Sam informed of his progress with the idea. Then he was back in the sports car with Asher, racing through the quiet countryside.

“What do you think?” she asked. He glanced down at her bare knees and thought of a reply, but then decided to stick to business. “It can be done,” he told her.

“By the weekend?”

“By the weekend. I just have to check on one piece of equipment and find a few people to help me. Do you need *all* the water?”

She thought about that. “Not every drop, naturally, but most of it. Enough to empty the pool.”

“I’m interested in why you want it, why it’s so valuable to you.”

“You’re getting \$20,000,” she reminded him. “For that much you can stay curious.”

“I have a couple of ideas,” he went on. “Once the pool is empty, perhaps those onyx slabs could be pried up and stolen.”

She glanced at him sideways. “You really think I’m a criminal, don’t you? Those slabs aren’t even real onyx—just a good imitation.”

“You can’t want the water for itself. It must be the emptiness of the pool that you really want.”

“I hired you to be a thief, not a detective.”

“Sometimes the logic demanded by the two professions isn’t that different,” he told her. “What about your connection with Fitzpatrick and his wife, anyway?”

“You mean the bit about my being a daughter to him? I suppose it’s true in a way. His first wife was Mary Dumont, my aunt. I spent most of my childhood with them, and they really did treat me like a daughter. My parents both died early, but there was a great deal of money in both branches of the family. I think, really, that Sam resented my aunt’s money. Anyway, a month or so after his first play was a hit, he asserted his independence one night and Aunt Mary left him. That was ten years ago, and nobody’s seen her since—though she occasionally sends me money through a lawyer in California.”

“Fitzpatrick divorced her?”

The girl nodded. “On the grounds of desertion. He married Lydia three years ago.”

“You resent Lydia, don’t you?”

“Because she took my aunt’s place? Oh, I suppose so.”

Nick Velvet was thinking of Lydia Fitzpatrick’s poor eyesight, and her swimming habits. Would she come running out to dive into the pool one morning and find only the hard concrete bottom waiting for her? Or did such things only happen in comic strips?

“One thing,” he said. “Of course, Fitzpatrick’s going to know the water’s being taken. There’s no way of stealing 19,000 gallons of water without his knowing about it.”

“I want him to know,” she told Nick. “As long as it’s before the holiday weekend.” She steered the sports car like an expert, maneuvering it through the beginnings of the rush-hour traffic. “I still can’t imagine how you’re going to do it, though. If he knows you’re taking it, how are you going to have the time to empty the entire pool?”

“Leave that to me,” Nick said with a smile. “That’s what you’re paying me for.”

Friday afternoon was calm and clear, with a musty heaviness about the air that hinted at a change

in weather before the long weekend really got under way. Sam Fitzpatrick and his wife were at the pool—she was sunning herself while he was typing a reply to a letter in the morning's mail.

It was midafternoon when he first smelled the smoke, and glanced over the fence at the nearby field. "Lydia! There's a grass fire here! Come look!"

"Hadn't we better call the Fire Department, Sam?" The fire already had a good start, spreading a sort of ring that reached from the distant woods almost to Fitzpatrick's line.

"Damn! I suppose I'd better." But then they heard the rising wail of the schoolhouse siren, and the answering call from the firehouse. The volunteers were on their way.

Within ten minutes the flaming field had been converged on by two pumpers and a pair of auxiliary water trucks. There were no hydrants out this far, and the volunteers had to bring their own water supply. Fitzpatrick knew most of the volunteer firemen by name, but this day a stranger in a rubber coat and leather helmet came running up to the fence.

"Mr. Fitzpatrick?"

"Yes. That's quite a blaze you've got there."

"Sure is." The stranger turned up his collar and glanced over Fitzpatrick's shoulder. "We need more water than our trucks can supply. Could we throw a hose into your swimming pool and pump out the water?"

"What? Say, don't I know you from somewhere?"

"Better hurry," the fireman warned him. "A shift in the wind could endanger your house."

"Well ... all right, I suppose so."

In a moment the heavy canvas hose was over the fence, splashing into the deep end of the pool. The fireman gave a signal to the nearest pumper and they started to drain Sam Fitzpatrick's water. Out in the distance two firemen played a smaller hose on the leading edge of the fire.

The familiar-looking fireman was everywhere, directing activities, shouting orders. After an hour, when the pool was already half empty, one of the auxiliary water trucks pulled out through the high grass to get a refill at the town tank.

Finally, when another truckload of water and the remainder of the pool's supply had been used up, the fire began to retreat and die. Sam Fitzpatrick watched it with relief, and he called out to the familiar-looking fireman, "You fellows want a drink?"

"No time now, sir. Thanks anyway."

"What about my pool?"

"The trucks will be out tomorrow to refill it. Thanks for your help."

Fitzpatrick watched them pull away and then walked over to stare into the empty swimming pool. At the deepest end a few inches of water remained, but otherwise there was only the damp concrete below.

He started to light a cigarette, then stopped suddenly with the lighted match in midair. He'd ju

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