

The Clarion Call

By O. Henry

Half of this story can be found in the records of the New York Police Department; the other half belongs behind the business counter of a newspaper office.

Two weeks after James Norcross, an elderly millionaire, and his wife were found in their apartment, robbed and murdered by a burglar, the detectives of the New York Police Department came close to admitting that they could not solve the case. Placing all the evidence gathered from the crime scene, the chief of detectives made one last appeal to his officers.

“Before we put this case on the back burner,” Chief Robertson pleaded, “can any one of you make any connection to any of this evidence?”

Detective Bernard Woods, just back from an out of town assignment, stepped forward and looked at the evidence for the first time. The bullets were like any others; the strands of hair were unexceptional; the photographs showed only the lifeless bodies. But one little piece of evidence caught his eye. It was a small, gold leaf mechanical pencil with the inscription of a corny old song -- *Camptown Racetrack*. The piece caught his eye because a

similar one had belonged to an old friend of his back in the days when Detective Woods worked on the *other* side of the law.

“Why don’t you let me work on this case for a week or so, chief,” said Woods. I’ve got a few friends around town who might know where this little pencil came from.”

“Well, give it a try. Don’t take more than a week. I have the feeling that this is a cold case.”

Woods thought differently. And for good reasons. He began hunting out the kind of bars, strip joints, gambling dens, and flea-bag hotels where he and his old friends used to hang out back in the day. And wouldn’t you know it -- it was in a dirty little hotel off Broadway that Woods finally struck paydirt. Standing at the bar of Muller’s Hotel, Woods was punched in the stomach -- playfully but firmly -- by a wise guy who slipped up behind him.

“Is that you, Johnny Kernan?” asked Woods, who had been punched that way before.

“No less,” cried Kernan, heartily. “If it isn’t Barney Woods of old Saint Joseph, Missouri! What are you doing here on the East Coast?”

“I’ve been in New York some years; I’m on the city detective force.”

“Well, well!” said Kernan, breathing his violent joy and punching the detective’s arm. The crook became a cop! I can’t believe it. Come to think of it, I *can* believe it.

“Come on ,” said Woods, “let’s hunt out a quiet table. I’d like to talk to you awhile.”

It was a few minutes before the hour of four, and they found a quiet corner of the bar. Kernan, well dressed, swaggering, self-confident, seated himself opposite the detective and his cheap suit.

“What business are you in now, Johnny?” asked Woods.

“Same old same old. I’m selling shares in a fake copper mine,” said Kernan, laughing. “Copper’s big now. A lot of suckers think they can get

rich quick. I oblige them by taking their money and disappearing. Who knows -- I may establish an office here... Well, well! And so old Barney is a New York detective. You always had a turn that way. You got yourself onto the police in Saint Joseph after I left there, didn't you?"

"Six months," said Woods. "I saw the light, Johnny. I turned my talents at breaking the law into helping uphold it."

"What a chump! How much do you make on the police force, Barney? Forty dollars a month?"

"A little more than that, replied Officer Woods."

"What a joke to work for a living like that," sneered Kernan.

"And now there's one question, Johnny. I've followed your record pretty closely ever since you did that hotel job in St. Louis, and I never knew you to use your gun before. Why did you kill poor old Mr. Norcross and his wife? They were too old to fight you. Why'd you kill 'em?"

Kernan stared for a few moments with concentrated attention at the slice of lemon in his cocktail; and then he looked at the detective with a suddenly crooked, brilliant smile.

"How did you guess it, Barney?" he asked, admiringly. "I swear I thought the job was as clean and as smooth as a peeled onion. Did I leave a loose string hanging out anywhere?"

Woods laid upon the table a small gold pencil with the inscription

Camptown Races

"It's the one I gave you the last Christmas we were in Saint Jo. I've still got your shaving mug. Boy were we friends back then! And the things we did! The police found this pencil under a corner of the rug in dead Norcross' room. I warn you to be careful what you say. I've got it put on to you, Johnny. We were old friends once, but I've gotta do my duty. You'll have to go to the electric chair for Norcross and his wife."

Kernan laughed. "My luck stays with me," he said. "Who'd have thought old Barney was on my trail!" He slipped one hand inside his coat. In an instant, Woods had a revolver out and against his side.

"Put it away," said Kernan, wrinkling his nose in a sneer. "I'm not going for a gun. I just wanted to show you -- there's a hole in that vest pocket of mine. I'm always losing things. Musta lost the pencil. So your top notch police force found that pencil in the dead man's room. Big deal. Do something about it!

"I will," replied the detective

Kernan yawned. Put away your gun, Barney, and I'll tell you why I had to shoot Norcross. The old fool started down the hall after me, popping at the buttons on the back of my coat with a stupid little .22 pistol, and I had to stop him. The old lady with him -- she was a darling. She just lay in bed and saw her \$12,000 diamond necklace go without a complaint while she begged like a little girl to have back a ring worth about \$3. She said it *meant* something to her. She must've married old Norcross for his money, right? So why do they beg for the little things? There were six rings, two brooches and a gold watch. Fifty thousand dollars worth. And she begged for the three dollar ring! Well, she's quiet now."

"I warned you not to talk," said Woods. "It'll be used against you in court."

"Oh, that's all right," said Kernan. "The stuff is in my suit case at the hotel. And now I'll tell you why I'm talking. Because it's safe. I'm talking to a man I know. You owe me a thousand dollars, Barney Woods, and even if you *wanted* to arrest me, your hand wouldn't make the move. After all, I was the one who saved you during that poker game ten years ago. I saved your hide when you bet on a hand of two lousy Queens with a thousand dollars you didn't have. They'd've killed you if you hadn't come up with the money. *I* saved you -- and guys like you don't forget a favor. No, Barney, you won't turn me in. You owe me."

"I haven't forgotten," said Woods. "You counted out twenty fifties without a word. I'll pay it back some day. That thousand saved me and -- well..." His voiced trailed off.

“And so,” continued Kernan, “you being Barney Woods, born as honest and true as polished steel, and bound to play an honest man’s game --you can’t lift a finger to arrest the man you’re indebted to. Oh, I have to study men as well as locks and safes in my business. And I know men like you. Boy scouts! Now, keep quiet while I ring for the waiter. What are you drinking these days?”

“Scotch.”

“Scotch it is,” said Kernan.

The waiter came with the drinks and left them alone again.

“So you’ve called in the favor,” said Woods, as he rolled the little gold pencil about with a thoughtful forefinger. I’ve got to pass you up. I can’t lay a hand on you. If I’d paid that money back -- but I didn’t, and that settles it. It’s a bad break I’m making, Johnny, but I can’t dodge it. You helped me once, and it calls for the same.”

“I knew it,” said Kernan, raising his glass, with a flushed smile of self-appreciation. “I can judge men -- men like you.”

“I don’t believe,” went on Woods quietly, as if he were thinking aloud, “that if accounts had been square between you and me, all the money in all the banks in New York could have gotten you out of my hands tonight.”

“I know it couldn’t,” said Kernan. “That’s why I knew I was safe with you.”

“Most people,” continued the detective, “look sideways at my business. They don’t class it among the fine arts and the professions. But I’ve always taken a kind of foolish pride in it. And here is where I go busted. I guess I’m a man first and a detective second. I’ve got to let you go, and then I’ve got to resign from the force. I guess I can drive a taxi to earn a living. Your thousand dollars is further off than ever, Johnny.”

“Oh, you’re welcome to it,” said Kernan, with a lordly air. “I’d be willing to call the debt off, but I know you wouldn’t have it. It was a lucky day for me when you borrowed it. And now, let’s drop the subject. I’m off to

Chicago on a morning train. I know a place out there where I can sell the Norcross jewels I stole. Drink up, Barney, and forget your troubles. We'll have a good time while the police are knocking their heads together over the case. But I'm in the hands — the unofficial hands — of my old friend Barney, and I won't even dream of being arrested. ”

And then, as Kernan's thirst kept the waiter working hard bringing drinks, a tremendous and arrogant ego began to show itself. He recounted story after story of his successful crimes, ingenious plots and grisley violence until Woods, with all his familiarity with criminals, felt growing within him a cold abhorrence toward the utterly vicious man who had once been his friend and savior.

Barney Woods made a promise to himself to do everything he could to put this man behind bars. But how to do it! How to get out from under that loan? For the next week, the underpaid detective took out every loan who could snare in a sad effort to come up with the thousand dollars he needed to pay off Kernan, free his conscience, make things square. Then he could arrest the bastard. But not much worked. He could scare up three hundred lousy dollars and not a penny more. Sheepishly, he approached Kernan one night with the money, and his old friend laughed him out of the room.

“All or nothing, pal. You don't square a debt until you wipe it off the books. All or nothing. Until then, you're indebted to me. You owe me. Leave me alone buddy boy.”

Woods crawled away like a rejected date.

One night a week later, Woods caught up with Kernan at a nice restaurant just off Park Avenue. Reluctantly, he sat down and accepted a drink from his one-time friend.

“Give it up, Barney,” said Johnny Kernan. “Accept the truth that you ain't got nothin' on me and never will -- because you'll never get your underpaid cop hands on that much money.”

Barney felt his blood rising, and he said something rash: “That damned thousand dollar loan!” said Woods. “I'm unable to act because of my debt to you.” “But I advise you to keep under cover for a while. The newspapers may take up this Norcross affair. There has been an epidemic of

burglaries and manslaughter in town this summer. The papers are getting interested.”

And that little word -- “newspapers” -- sent Kernan into a state of vindictive rage.

“To hell with the newspapers,” he growled. “What do they spell but brag and blow on paper? Suppose they *do* take up a case, what does it amount to? The police are easy enough to fool; but what do the newspapers do? They send a lot of clam-head reporters around to the scene; and they make for the nearest saloon and have beer while they take photos of the bartender’s daughter story and interview the idiot who thought he heard a noise below on the night of the murder. That’s about as near as the newspapers ever come to running down Mr. Burglar. They wanna sell papers, not solve crimes.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said Woods, reflecting. “Some of the papers have done good work along those lines. There’s the **New York Times**, for instance. There’s the **Morning Mars**, for another. And the **New York Clarion Call**. These papers have warmed up two or three crime trails, and they sometimes get the man after the police have let ‘em get away. That man sitting at the table over there -- Dave Bastom -- he’s the editor of the **Clarion Call**. He’d be a man to watch out for. He’d love to put out a headline that’d get a crook like you. ”

“Oh yeah? I’ll show you,” said Kernan, rising, and expanding his chest. “I’ll show you what I think of newspapers in general, and your **Clarion Call** in particular.”

Thirty feet from their table sat the well known editor. Kernan walked across room just as the man arose to leave. Woods sat still, looking at the sneering, cold face, and listening intently to the words that came from the thin, angry lips curved into a nasty smile.

“You the editor?” asked Kernan. “All right. . . . then what have you done to find the man who killed old Norcross?”

Taken off guard by the man who approached him, the editor replied, “We’ve got a reporter working on the case.”

“The hell!“ I’ve just been discussing it with a detective friend of mine. Someone killed the old man at 2:30 A. M. two weeks ago tomorrow, and you guys ain’t found nothing. Your reporter! Did he check with the cab driver? Did he check with the old lady across the street? No! You and your clam-head reporters are too stupid to really sniff out any intelligent crime.

The editor, thinking he was talking to a crazy man, began to move toward the exit.

Kernan began to yell in drunken satisfaction. “I want to tell you that your rotten, lying newspaper is of no more use in tracking an intelligent murderer than a blind dog would be. Kind of rattles you, doesn’t it, to have a smart guy call out your great, big, all-powerful newspaper and tell you what a helpless old gas bag you are? You clam heads didn’t do nothin’ right, nothin’. Big crime reporters! Couldn’t find a pimple if they told ya what cheek it was on!”

The editor turned. “Would you please get out of my way. I’ve got to leave.”

Kernan ranted. “You know I’m right. No, you don’t think I’m a fraud. I can tell it by your voice. You know that I know that you’re a moron!”

As the editor of **The Clarion Call** left, Kernan turned to Woods with a vicious smile. “I’ve got him going. He believes me now, but he’s not smart enough to find the culprit -- not smart enough to nab *me*.

Barney Woods couldn’t help but warn his one-time friend of the danger to which he was subjecting himself. “I’d be careful, Johnny. The newspaper files are never closed. If they smell something, they’ll work to sniff it out. They’re just like the cops that way. I wouldn’t hand out free clues to your crime.”

Kernan was quite drunk by now. “You didn’t think—I’d run from such a little rag of a newspaper, did you? . . . They’ll have me? No way! Will you quit being funny? These newspapers let grown men like me alone and attend to their stupid business of hunting up celebrity divorce cases and street-car accidents and printing the filth and scandal that they make their living by.

“That editor is one of the best minds in the business. You shouldn’t

offer him clues,” repeated Woods.

“Oh that business of the cab driver and the lady across the street -- they weren’t real clues. I just wanted to show him he was a clam-head. And now, Barney my boy, we’ll go to a show and enjoy ourselves until a reasonable bedtime. Four hours’ sleep for me, and then the west-bound train to Chicago.”

The two dined in a Broadway restaurant. Kernan was pleased with himself. He spent money like a drunken king. A weird and gorgeous musical comedy engaged their attention. Afterward there was a late supper in a steak grill, with champagne, and Kernan raged at the height of his self-satisfaction. “They’ll never get me -- not them, not you, not no one.

Woods had to speak. “I’m not sure you’re *really* too smart for us, Johnny.”

Kernan’s smile suddenly disappeared. “I’m sick of lookin’ at ya, Barney. Go somewhere.”

And so Barney Woods, the former criminal and present day \$100 a month cop wandered off into the night with a thousand thoughts swirling in his head. Half-past three in the morning found him in a corner of an all night cafe, still remembering Kernan’s boasting in that rambling way. He couldn’t help thinking moodily over the end that he had come to... and his uselessness as an upholder of the law.

But as he pondered, his eye brightened with a speculative light. “I wonder if it’s possible,” he said to himself, “I wonder if it’s possible! I wonder...”

Before the sun arose next morning, Detective Woods found himself in the office of the early rising Dave Bastom, the editor of The Clarion Call.

“Just how much do you think it’s worth to find the murderer of old Mr. Norcross and his wife?” asked Woods.

“A considerable sum,” replied the newspaper editor.

“A thousand dollars?” asked Woods.

“It could be arranged.”

And so it *was* arranged

And then on the streets of old New York, the cries of newspaper boys were heard. Shrill cries they were when near—well-known cries that conveyed many meanings to the ears of those of the slumbering millions of the great city who waked to hear them.

“Extra, Extra. Read all about!” the boys shouted as they sold their newspapers to so many of the eight million people living in the city.

These were cries that bore upon their significant, small volume the weight of a world’s woe and laughter and delight and stress. To some, cowering beneath the protection of a night’s temporary cover, they brought news of the dangerously bright day. To many of the rich they brought news of stock market investments. To the poor, they brought news of job offerings. To others, wrapped in happy sleep, they simply announced another morning.

All over the city the cries were starting up. Shrill and yet urgent were the cries, as if the young voices grieved that so much evil and so little good was in their irresponsible hands. “Extra, extra, read all about it!”

Thus echoed in the streets of the great city the transmission of the latest realities of the world, all delivered through the cries of the newsboys — the Clarion Call of the Press.

It was just ten AM as Detective Barney Woods climbed about the westbound train to Chicago and flipped a dime to the porter, saying, “Gimme a Clarion Call.”

When the newspaper came, he hardly glanced at its first page. He walked down the aisle to car number seven, where sat the smirking Johnny Kernan, slightly hung over, but anxious to head for the windy city. Pulling a signed cashier’s check from his pocket, Woods handed the item to Kernan, who looked with amazement at his own name on the check:

Cashier's Check First National Bank of New York
Pay to the Order of

John Kernan

The Sum of One Thousand Dollars \$1000.00

The Clarion Call News Service

Johhny Kernan responded with an open mouthed grunt as he reached toward his vest pocket. But Detective Woods was ready with a drawn weapon. "Don't even think about going for your gun," he ordered. "Put your hands behind your back."

As Woods cuffed Kernan, the inevitable question was blurted: "Where the hell did a two bit cop get his hands on a thousand dollars?"

"I didn't get the money -- you did. The information you gave Dave Bastom that night when you drunkenly approached him was enough to make him interested in the case. I filled in a few details. He was so impressed that he offered me a reward for the information. But I'm a cop. I don't take money for doing my job. I thanked him, and told him to pay the next best informant. That's *you*, buddy boy. Woods tossed Kernan a copy of the day's newspaper.

Kernan's eyes nearly popped out when he read how *he* had won a one thousand dollar reward for providing information leading to his own arrest!

The New York Clarion Call
April 5, 1911
One Thousand Dollar Reward
to the Person
Providing Information
Leading to the Arrest
of the
Norcross Murderer



Millionaire James W. Norcross

Police have reported new leads into how Norcross was murdered.

In their investigation of the brutal murder last March by an unknown killer. Authorities have offered a reward of \$1000 to anyone who helps in finding his killer. Contact the authorities.

“I kind of thought the editor of one of the city’s best papers would do that,” said Woods, “after the way you spoke to him last night. The man has pride. And newspaper men don’t forget. Now, Johnny, I’ve repaid my debt to you, so come along to the police station with me. You’re under arrest.”

Jonny Kernan was to stunned to resist.