

## [The Letter]

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AMERICAN STUFF

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J.D.Stradling

826 S. Wabash

Chicago.

Illinois

THE LETTER

"Broke? No, They aint all broke on Madison Street. Maybe you're the kind that thinks because a guy's panhandlin' he aint got nothin'. There's lots of money been made by the ones who know how. And dont blow it for booze, see? It's the booze that gets the money away from 'em.

No, thanks. I aint drinkin' tonight.

Mostly they panhandle because they are broke, I admit. But them's just amateurs. I was goin, to tell you about the real old timers like Jake Massey.

Puttin' the bee on is about as good as ever in spite of hard times. In the old days a lot of people used to tell 'em to go get a job. Now they know there aint no jobs. People aint got so much money now but they aint got so much resistance, either. Some of the real professionals do all right.

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Old Jake Massey was the real thing, see? He'd been up the stem in every town in the United States. Spent his life sizin' up suckers and knew every trick of the trade. The old carfare gag, the sore foot gag, the three children starvin' at home, and all that, was chump stuff to him. He had real tricks, most of which he thought up himself.

Never worked a day in his life.

As I say, he'd been all over the country, but he was the kind of a guy that never paid a cent to go nowhere. He was against it on principle. Fact he was against payin' 2 money under any circumstances.

Well, one night he was goin' through Hutcheson, Kansas, on a rattler when three young fellers scrambled from the State Reformatory there. Massey and three other boes was bedded down in the reefer of an orange car that dont need any ice, see? The train stopped for orders and to let a passenger go by. The boes got tipped off by the shack that the bulls was ridin' the drags through town, lookin' for the escapes.

It was a fruit express, headin' east on the highball. The dicks started workin' the train from the front end and they didnt get the tip until she was already haulin' fast. The bulls would drop off at a junction outside of town after they'd cleaned the rattler.

Massey and the others had to do a swing off and roll. But Jake hits a switch block in the dark and breaks a leg. After that he couldnt swing the rattlers no more so he settled down here in Chi. Like a lot of cripples, he went sour on the world.

About as mean as they come, I guess. And as he got older, he got meaner. Never made a side kick. Never had any friends. No family that anyone ever heard of. Never bought a drink for anybody in his life and didnt drink himself. We mighta figured he was saltin' down, except that we didnt bother to figure about him at all. He was just a bad smell. Everybody was glad to forget old Jake.

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But he worked every day and sometimes half the night. Panhandlin', I mean. And his expenses didnt amount to much. When he wanted to eat, he'd bum a feed. When he needed some clothes, he'd bum them. And he didnt need much clothes in 3 his line. He was always in rags, just an old scare-crow guy that nobody ever took a second look at. And remember, there were times when the bee used to bring in ten to twelve bucks a day.

Well, one night Massey got kicked by a truck and when the cops had hauled him to the County, it was curtains. They went through him for identification to get a line on relatives, if any, to maybe save the taxpayers a hox job. There wasnt anything like that on him so they planted him in a dump somewhere, wherever guys like that go.

But they did find four bankbooks on him with different accounts. He was so mean he didnt trust any one bank. Didnt trust any of them very much. His clothes felt funny and the cops took 'em apart. Inside, sewed up into the linings, they found bills all over him and Government bonds. There was fourteen thousand dollars altogether.

It's happened before and it's happened since. Every once in a while you read something like that in the papers. For a couple of weeks after something like that, it aint [saf?] for any old crummy on the street after dark. They were get [him?] rolled right and left. But nobody ever guesses about these queer old guys until after they kick off or they would be jack rolled right away, see?

They aint exactly misers. They got the knack of gettin' the dough but dont know what it's good for, see? Never had nothin' and dont want nothin'. They eat slum and can even flop in the park in the summer. A few old rags do for clothes. There was a time when good ones like old Massey could take in up to twenty bucks in a day and live on four bits.

No, thanks. Really I dont want a drink tonight. No. 4 I aint sick.

Well, a lot of people around here got to thinkin' about Jake. He had to kick off to get attention, except from the cops. The fourteen thousand was tied up in the court and no

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relatives. Of course, about a dozen turned up to claim he was their long lost brother or something like that. Three or four got housed for perjury and the rest was told not to try that again. The judge was no fool and the dough stayed put.

But all the time folks is thinkin', well, here's an old guy that's been on the stem all his life an' never spendin' a cent that anybody ever saw— didnt booze, see?— so is the fourteen thousand all, or has he got a sock somewhere?

And that's how come a couple of amateurs got in a jam.

Now if there's one thing in the world you cant bum, even if you're good as old Jake at it, it's a flop. Nobody's goin' to take in a bum to sleep, see? He's got to get the cash first and lay it on the line. There aint such a thing as credit in the flophouses.

So people began to recollect things about him. Old Jake bunked in a two bit cage house in cold weather but soon as it warmed up, he'd move out. And he was too smart to sleep in the park, see? Come to think of it, they says, there was six or seven months every year when old Jake was holed up somewhere, but nobody knew where. And there's folks that sure would like to know.

Well, nobody seemed to know except one of these two guys I was goin' to tell you about. And he'd been on the road. He'd just come in for the winter. Somebody told him old Jake was dead but it didnt mean anything. He'd missed the two inch 5 human interest bit that was all Jake rated in the papers after sixty five years on the stem.

Sammy Mitchel was kinda like Jake in some ways. He wasnt very well liked, either. The kind of a guy who would let you buy until you went broke and then remember he had a date somewhere else. He picked up a big Mick named Bill one night when they both got drunk on Bill's money. They was both lookin' for a side kick so they paled up. And Bill was too dumb to notice things about Sammy.

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Just amateurs, see? They'd both worked at some time but they'd forgot when. Sammy would take a job once in a while if he thought there was something extra in it, like playin' Santa Claus on the corner at Christmas. He liked to stand and figger how to get his hand in the little hole where the money goes down the chimney. I guess he never did figger that one out because the Salvation Army has been hirin' guys like Sammy for years and knows its oats.

This pair never had nothin' because it all went for booze. They just bummed enough for cakes, flop and a pint. Sometimes it was just the pint. In the summer they'd sleep out. They could mooch a feed when they had to. Sometimes they could even bum drinks. But in winter things wasnt so good. Like I say, you cant bum a flop. Remember that cold winter we had in '35 and 6?

Well, one night Sammy and Bill is stuck for what it takes. The thermometer takes a dive and keeps on goin' down. The jails is full in the basements and the Missions is doin' a rushin' business convertin' sinners so long as they have hot soup to pass out.

There was Relief but Sammy and Bill are a couple of 6 rolling stones without any address. And they think they're the genuine article, like Jake Massey, who dont have no use for Relief. That's for chumps who dont know how to get by.

About seven at night Sammy meets Bill at Desplaines.

"Did you get it?" he says.

"Nope," says Bill. "It's so cold people wont stop. They got to take off their gloves to get into their pockets, anyway. I aint raised a dime."

"Neither have I," says Sammy. "Criminently, I been workin' hard all day. I opened a hundred cars doors, I picked up an old guy who skidded on the ice. I carried bundles for an old lady, an' what do you think I got?"

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“I dunno.”

“A nickle,” says Sammy in disgust. “The old lady pulls out a little purse that looks like a squashed grape and says, 'Now I aint giving you this because I think you deserve it, I'm just doing a good deed for the satisfaction'. I says, 'Cripes, lady, make it a quarter and show yourself a real good time', and would you believe it? she got mad.”

Bill is real sad. “It looks like we got to get saved, he says.

“No,” says Sammy. “I'm so hungry I wouldnt sit two hours for a bowl of soup. And by that time it would be too late to do anything else. We'd be carryin' a banner in the parade, sure. Folks is goin' home early tonight. Let's try it again. You go one way and I'll go the other. We'll meet here at ten o'clock. And remember, pal, we share what we get.”

“Okay,” says Bill. “Fifty fifty, that's us. We'll get it yet. It's so darned cold somebody ought to open up.”

Sammy went toward Ashland. Bill was so desperate he 7 headed for the loop where he's liable to get picked up in five minutes. But it was too cold for the cops, I guess. There were only a few poeple out and they were hurryin, so fast they wouldnt listen. After a couple of hours, Bill is like to freeze.

He drops in at the La Salle Street Depot to warm up but is run out right away because there have been too many bums droppin' in. So he heads back west on Madison. Maybe Sammy has had some luck, he thinks. And Sammy will whack up.

But Before he gets to Desplaines, he sees Sammy turning into a flop joint— not the one they been stayin' at. He waits a few minutes at the door, gettin' kinda suspicious when Sammy dont come out. So Bill goes in. He sees Sam Smith on the register. There's no sign of Sammy around but the last name must be him. So Bill says he's a friend of Sam Smith and the clerk tells him 407.

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Sammy is just gettin' his pants off when Bill walks in. Like I said, Bill is just a big Mick, and you know how they are. He sees red because he's been whackin, with Sammy right along. There's a rough-house right off.

But they got a bouncer there about seven feet tall and a few minutes later they are both out on the street again, feeling considerably the worse for wear, and no refund.

“Now look what you went and done,” says Sammy, mad as a hornet, “I was goin' to meet you at ten, like I said. You could have gone into the washroom, sneaked up the other stairs, and bunked with me. Now look at us!”

Seein' Sammy already had his pants off, Bill aint more than about half sold. But, like I said, Bill is pretty dumb.

“Sorry, pal,” he says, “I guess the cold got me. I 8 cant take it. For a minute I sure suspected you of somethin'.”

“Well, there's only one thing I can think of now,” says Sammy. “Look. We gotte do something.”

“Okay,” says Bill. “But what?”

“There was an old guy used to be around by the name of Jake Massey,” says Sammy. “He's dead now, they tell me. But when I was just a squirt, ridin' the rods, we had to pile off a fast freight one night. He jumped on a switch block and broke his leg. I stayed with him until they got him to a hospital.

“I ran into him here in Chi a year or so ago. He remembered me and invited me home with him for old times sake. I didnt stay long because he just had an old hole in a cellar and nothin' to drink. The old bastard even tried to put the bee on me because I had a couple of bucks.

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“Now he was the kind of a guy that never paid nobody for anything and I dont think they even knew he was livin' there. It'll be cold as hell because it's just an old empty building that aint been used in years. The front is boarded up and we had to go in through an alley. He said he lived there every summer because it was nice and cool down there. But if nobody knew about it, there's a chance his joint may still be there. It's somethin' anyhow.”

“Okay,” says Bill. “Let's go.”

Well, they found the place just like Jake had walked out two months before. Furniture and all, except the junk dont amount to much. There was a piece of candle that gave enough light, and not even a window in the place, so they felt safe enough. If Jake had used it for years, they was good 9 for the night, see?

The bed is only a cot without even a blanket but there is an old tin stove. They crack up some rubbish and build a fire, which helps some. While they was rustlin' up paper, Bill had picked up a little scrap not good enough for anything, just a little piece torn out of a paper. But he still held onto it for some reason.

“Say,” he says. “Did you say the old guy's name was Jake Massey?”

“Yeah,” says Bill, huntin' in the cupboard, wonderin' if there is anything to eat. “What of it?”

“Nothin'. Only here's a piece in the paper about a guy with that name.”

Sammy grabs the piece and finds it's the notice about old Jake gettin' kicked off.

“Fourteen thousand bucks!” yells Sammy. “And the old so-and-so bummed four bits offa me!”

“It says he was a hab-it-too of Madison Street,” says Bill. “What kind of a racket is that? See—h-a-b-i-t-u-e.”



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“Skip it,” says Sammy. “I know what he was an' it dont begin with an aitch.”

Then Sammy gets an idea. “Funny,” he says. “This notice was in after he died. Somebody has been here since.” He goes huntin' around and finds a whole paper. It has got the same notice in it. “Two somebodies has been here,” says Sammy, “for that notice didnt come out of this paper.”

“They're lookin' for more money,” says Bill.

“Sure. If he had fourteen thousand on him, there may be some more here. Somebody thinks so, anyway.”

“They musta had plenty of time to search,” says Bill.

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“Yeah. Either they found it or it's hid where nobody would think to look. I remember he went foolin' around behind the old bureau there. Let's see.

So they moved the old relic that Jake Massey had bummed somewhere and, sure enough, there was a loose brick in the old wall. They pried it out and Sammy slips in a hand. He brings out a handful of stuff— an old watch with the face busted, a jackknife, some miscellaneous papers, one letter, and such stuff.

“Junk!” says Bill in disgust. “But nobody found that hideaway or they'd have taken the watch. I bet he was so suspicious he had it all on him. We wont find nothin'. An, even the watch aint no good. You couldnt get four bits on it.”

“That's funny,” says Bill, handlin' the other stuff. “The letter aint been opened.”

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Sammy takes it and sees that Bill is right. "It's dated four years ago," he says. "Guess he musta known who it was from and didnt bother to open it. That would be like him. He didnt have no more use for people than they had for him."

"Who's it from?" says Bill.

"Says 'Sally Wilton' in the corner. Somebody in Omaha. Imagine him gettin' love letters from a woman. It aint natural. We ought to get a kick out of this."

So Sammy tears the letter open just out of curiosity. Out drops something green. They give a whoop and crack their heads together as they dive for it.

It's a ten dollar bill.

Bill has got more reach than Sammy and he gets it.

"It's mine," says Sammy. "I found the letter."

"Fifty fifty, pal," says Bill. "And this time I aint 11 gonna sneak in no washroom after you aint seen me at Desplaines. I'll keep it for safe keepin'."

And Bill is a big guy, see? Sammy is just a little feller.

"Well, we got it at last," Sammy says, makin, the best of it. "We wont have to sleep here, after all."

Still curious, he unfolds the letter. There was an address in Omaha and like the outside it was dated four years before.

"'Dear father'. Imagine him bein, a father," says Sammy. "'Dear father: I'm so glad to hear something about you after all these years. Chet Blake was in Chicago and saw you going into a sort of hotel. He jotted down the address. I do hope this reaches you in that place

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for he said you looked, well, very poorly. It is all I could get anywhere but I wish you would write to me—”

Sammy didnt finish the letter. He just snorted as he looked at Bill. “Probably knew she was in hard lines and thought she might ask him for somethin’,” he says. “If you feel any earthquakes, it will be old Jake turnin’ over in his grave when he finds out how he missed this ten bucks.”

Bill was just about to say something, standin’ there with the sawbuck still in his mitt, when there was a noise behind them. They both turned around and liked to drop dead.

There was a jigaboo in the cellar with them as black as the rest of the place beyond the candle. He had on a nice gray overcoat and pearl gray hat and his collar was pink and white stripes. He had a gun in his hand that looked a foot long and from the way he was handling it, he was in 12 good practise.

“Put em up, white boys,” he says, and they try to poke holes in the roof. He comes forward and takes the sawbuck right out of Bill's hand.

“There's been a lot of boys pokin, round since old Jake died,” he says. “But you're the first ones with ideas. Every time ah sees smoke comin' out of that chimbley, ah comes over to have a look. Is that all yo' found?”

“That's all,” squeals Sammy. “Dont shoot.”

“Ah know it is,” says the jig. “Ah been listenin'. Now SCRAM.”

At that, Sammy and Bill is out in the cold again and headin' down the alley at six to the second. Except they hadnt gone far before they run smack into the arms of a cop.

“Hold up there, you bums,” he says. “What you been up to, now?”

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He gets both of 'em by the coat before they know it and hangs on.

"We aint been up to nothing," says Sammy who is the quickest of the two. "Honest, mister, we was just lookin, for a place to sleep. But there's a coon in there with a gun that long."

"Where? There? There aint nobody in there, that's an empty building," says the cop.

"Yes there is. He just run us out. With a gun."

"Come along, then. We'll see about this."

But Sammy holds back. "We dont want to go back in there," he says. "He might shoot."

"No, you want to stay out here while I go in," says the cop. "And then you can run. I heard that one before.

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Just to be sociable, we'll all go in."

Well, they went in again. There wasnt no one there, of course. But the cop takes a look around and sees somebody has been livin' there. Evidently he never heard of Jake Massey or had nothing to connect it up, if he had.

"Who lives here?" he asks. And he's a real tough lookin' cop.

"I dunno," says Sammy before he thinks twice.

"Oh, breakin' in!" says the cop. "You dont know who lives here. I ketch you comin' out and you try to stall me with a story about somebody with a gun. That's very nice!"

They keep quiet about the ten dollars, not wantin, it to be any worse than it is.

And that's how come Sammy and Bill finally got put up for the night.

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A few minutes later, Bill stretched out on a nice cot and looked at the big black bars.

“No hard feelin's, pal?” he asks.

“No. I aint mad about the fight,” says Sammy.

“It looks like we got it now, for sure.”

“Yeah, we got it. For about ninety days,” says Sammy. “We'll get vagged, sure, even if they dont call us a couple of burglars and plaster us with the book.”

“Oh, well,” says Bill. “It'll be nice and warm when we come out. I guess we dont have to worry no more this winter. It could be worse. But you know, I kinda think somebody ought to let that woman know there's a lot of money waitin' for her. Kinda get even with old Jake, see?”

“Look here,” says Sammy, very serious. “You forget all about that, see? If they find out we were lookin, for 14 old Jake's money, we're liable to get ten years.”

And like I said, Bill was kinda dumb. He did forget all about it.

By and by, they're out and Sammy disappeared. Bill lost his side kick and never did know what became of him. But Sammy remembered the address on that letter and grabbed a rattler for Omaha. He got a job for awhile and bought a front.

Sally Wilton was a widow with two kids. Things had been breakin' pretty tough for her. She'd never heard from the old man and had given him up.

I see you got it. Yeah. He married her. They come back to Chi and put in a claim for the money. They finally got it. She had proofs, see?

I dont know what became of Bill. Just rollin' along, I guess.

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Doin' well? Huh! Not Sammy. He never does. He's back on Madison Street. I saw him the other day and the chiseler tried to bum a quarter.

And say, that reminds me.

I'm kinda stuck, myself, tonight. Could you spare a buck?