

THE PERSONAL EQUATION

Then he signed his name, just like that—'George Manning Shea.'

The statement really deserves to have a paragraph all to itself. For it is a very important statement. It is a statement, at least, that conveys information concerning a fact important in the eyes of the man who did the signing. For his signature, you must know, meant very, very much to him, and on this occasion it meant two thousand dollars to the good ladies and gentlemen of the Brunnsfield Humane Society.

So, having signed the cheque for two thousand dollars, George Manning Shea capped his fountain pen, thrust it with a flourish into the upper left-hand pocket of his pearl grey waistcoat, blotted the rectangular strip of paper with more energy than the operation strictly required and sat back and bit the end off a perfectly good cigar. Now, when George Manning Shea sat back, with that unlighted cigar between his sharp, white teeth and his stubby thumbs tucked complacently into the armholes of the aforementioned, pearl grey waistcoat, the broad, capable shoulders and the generous expanse of torso, to say nothing of the square jaw and the blunted nose and the small eyes and the low forehead and the bullet head that ran down straight to a thick neck, made him look surprisingly like the conception of the Sugar Trust entertained by our most popular newspaper cartoonists.

Of course, George Manning Shea was not the Sugar Trust. But he was something almost as important—president and manager of the Brunnsfield Iron Works. And anybody who knows anything about Brunnsfield will tell you that the Brunnsfield Iron Works is a corporation that has governing contracts coming in almost every week and that has over two thousand men on its pay-roll.

George Manning Shea, having sucked at his unlighted cigar for several minutes with much apparent satisfaction, pressed a button under the left of his flat-topped desk, whereupon the door of ground glass opened noiselessly and a young woman entered, notebook in hand, and seated herself at his side.

'Take this: Mrs. Henry A. Bates, Vice president Brunnsfield Humane Society, City. My dear madam: Enclosed please find my cheque for two thousand dollars in aid of your Social Centre Fund. I trust that your worthy work will meet with the generous recognition it so eminently deserves, and believe me, Very truly yours.' Got that? All right. Now take this: 'Carroll E. Short, Secretary Gulf and South Atlantic Steamship Company. Dear sir: In reply to your favor of the 12th instant, would say that terms you quote cannot, for manifest reasons, be satisfactory to us. In the matter of lawser holes along the expense of pattern-making—'

The glazed door again opened and the President of the Brunnsfield Iron Works looked up with an impatient, inquiring frown.

'A clerical gentleman to see you, sir,' said the dapper youth who entered the room.

'Card?' demanded Mr. Shea, stretching out a hasty hand.

'He says he has no cards, sir, but asked me to tell you that he is Father Cleary of the Church of the— I forget the exact title, sir.'

'Find out what he wants.' And as the door closed upon the retreating figure of the dapper young man, the president continued his dictation:

'Expense of pattern-making has so increased, owing to the rise in lumber and the excessive demands of skilled labor, that we cannot entertain your proposition to manufacture at an eighteen-dollar rate. If you will be good enough to look over the enclosed schedule of specifications you will see' Well what does he want?

The dapper young man, who had re-entered with well-oiled unobtrusiveness, smiled discreetly.

'He says it is a confidential matter, sir.'

Mr. Shea grunted and took in another half inch of his unlighted cigar.

'Well, I'll see him—shortest way. That's all, Miss Fulton. Round it off with best compliments and so forth and enclose carbon copy of Schedule C.'

Hardly had the stenographer glided from the room when the dapper young man ushered in the visitor. Mr. Shea saw before him a man rather undersized and inclined to corpulency, thin-haired, and a bit florid, attired in a loose-fitting clerical sack coat. The president nodded brusquely and indicated a chair.

'Father Murphy, I believe.'

'Father Cleary, if you please, of the Church of the Assumption. I have taken the liberty of calling on you to-day to thank you for your munificent donation to the—'

'How much was it I sent?'

'Ten dollars, Mr. Shea. It was very kind of you.'

Mr. Shea fingered the cheque for the Humane Society.

'Munificent donation,' he said under his breath, and smiled. The sight of this little priest, who seemed so thankful for ten dollars, somehow struck him as pitiful. The president of the Brunnsfield Iron Works had little sympathy with men who made small demands and who accepted small favors.

'Always a pleasure to me to help out in good works,' he said aloud, and more pompously, perhaps, than the occasion warranted. But his glance fell upon that cheque before him, and he took another grip on his unlighted cigar.

Father Cleary fumbled with his hat, cleared his throat and resumed:

'As I said, I appreciate your kindness very much. And now, even at the risk of overdoing things, I have come to ask a still greater favor.'

Mr. Shea pursed up his lips and half-closed his little eyes. His face seemed to give warning: 'I'm not an easy mark. That will be about all from you.' But inwardly he was saying: 'I'll bet the little man has screwed up courage and is going to ask me for a twenty.'

'Well, Father Cleary? Come to the point as fast as you can, please.'

'I'll try to take up as little of your valuable time as possible. We have a society in the parish known as the Catholic Boys' Club. The members are boys, many of them workers in your shops, whom we take hold of three evenings a week and try to—'

'Excuse me, Father Cleary, but that isn't what I call coming to the point. It cuts no ice with me whether you're talking about this boys' club of yours or about the what was it I gave that "munificent donation" to?'

'The St. Anne's Guild,' replied Father Cleary, with a mildness that vaguely irritated the president of the Brunnsfield Iron Works.

'All right. As I say, that cuts no ice with me. I trust to you to see that the money is spent on a good work. That's what you're there for. I have neither time nor inclination to bother about details. Organisation organised charity—that's what I believe in. I have the money and I give it to you, and you see that it gets to the places where it will go farthest and do the most good. Business methods, you see, applied to charity.'

Mr. Shea twisted his mouth in order to shift his unlighted cigar a bit nearer his wisdom teeth and beamed upon his visitor with an air of urbane superiority. Oh, he could give this unassuming little priest a few pointers on organised charity, all right!

But the unassuming little priest, somehow, didn't seem to be particularly impressed. He smiled, with one of those quiet, inscrutable smiles that might mean almost anything except respectful recognition of superior acumen.

'Yes, sree, organised charity, business-like charity. That's what gets results nowadays. Which reminds me,' he continued, seeing the priest's smile broaden a trifle, 'that some of you clerical gentlemen don't sufficiently value its possibilities. I might as well be frank: some of you are pikers. You're willing to bow your heads off when somebody throws you ten dollars.'

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