

The Stolen Story

by Johnston McCulley

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We told you in the Headquarters Chat, last summer, how another magazine had been victimized by a plagiarist, who sold a story which had been published in DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE, to another editor. Rather facetiously we suggested that some of our astute authors might aid us in tracking the miscreant. Johnston McCulley was the first to snatch up the gauntlet. Here is the result.

THEMPTATION often had come to John Branton, in one form or another, as it comes to the best of us, and generally he had turned his back upon it and gone on his way a law-abiding and self-respecting citizen, if not an affluent one.

Four years out of college, John Branton found that he was not getting along very well. In common with most college graduates, he once had possessed ambitions that were comprehensive. Buffeted by what he believed was a cruel fate, Branton had failed to achieve any of the things that once he had believed possible.

Because he liked to read, and because he wished to associate with people who really were doing things—the creators—John Branton, during his college career, had decided to become an author. He had applied himself faithfully to the study of English and the classics, and after having been graduated he had demonstrated to his satisfaction the fact that a man may not create himself merely because he appreciates and understands the creations of others.

John Branton was long on technic and short on ability to stir human emotions or touch the human heart. His English was without a flaw, yet he could not drive home a point when he wrote. He had studied books to the exclusion of humanity—and it is humanity that successful authors write about.

Now, four years out of college, he was

holding down a humble clerkship that served to keep him in food and clothing, and still trying to write. Regularly his compositions were returned to him by magazine editors who appreciated his command of English, but who knew that their readers never would get beyond the first paragraph. The ambition of John Branton was low at times, and then it would flare forth again when he read of some other man's success. Ungratified ambition may prove to be a treacherous thing. It was so in the case of Branton; it led him into temptation.

Branton lived in a house where there were bachelor apartments. He had a tiny kitchenette and cooked some of his own meals. Each evening he tried to write. He gave little attention to the other persons in the house. He hated the clerk's job; he wanted to see his name in print; he wanted to be somebody.

Then there came an evening when he heard a knock at the door. John Branton hurried across the room and opened it. Before him stood a peculiar individual, a man some six feet tall, with broad shoulders and an enormous head, with long thick hair that was unkempt, with small glittering black eyes that looked evil—a grotesque figure of a man.

"My water faucet's being fixed," said the grotesque one. "I live in the front, this floor. Let me get a pitcher of water, please?"

John Branton always was courteous. He asked the grotesque one in, filled the pitcher for

him, and handed it back with a bow.

"Help yourself until they fix you up," Branton said.

The other had been glancing at Branton's desk.

"Newspaper man?" he asked.

"No. I am a clerk for a mercantile agency," Branton replied bitterly. "But I try to write a bit now and then. I always wanted to be a writer, but the road is a hard one."

"Um! I haven't found it so."

"You are a writer?"

"In a way. I have had some success in a small way. Anything I write seems to sell readily enough, but I don't like to write."

"Don't like to write?" Branton queried, gasping. "I should think you'd love it."

"A man always likes to do what he cannot, and seldom likes to do what he can do well. My name is Marmaduke Loughtry. Silly name, but mine own."

"I—I'm glad to meet you," Branton said.

"I'm sure I don't know why. Come in and see me some time, if it pleases you."

Branton did. He cultivated Marmaduke Loughtry to a certain extent. Unable to write successfully, he felt that the next best thing was to associate with a man who did. And Branton thought it possible that he might pick up a few ideas that would put him on the right track.

Almost from the first he felt disgusted with Marmaduke Loughtry. The man could write and sell almost everything that he wrote, yet he did not seem to care for the talent that was his. Marmaduke Loughtry wrote only now and then. He spent a great deal of time and money indulging in liquor. He disappeared for days at a time, and returned ill and seedy.

"I'd work my head off if I could write like that man," John Branton told himself.

Branton began to feel bitter about it, too. Why should such a man as Loughtry have this heaven-sent gift when he abused it so? Why should Marmaduke Loughtry have his name in print, and have editors writing him for stories, when a decent fellow like John Branton had no success whatever?

"If I could get one story printed—just one!" Branton thought.

Loughtry took no pride in his work. He did

not keep copies of his stories on file, kept no records of their publication, scarcely remembered what they had been about. One night Branton read a paragraph in one of them and commented on its beauty.

"I forgot I wrote that," Loughtry said. "Half the time I don't know what I'm writing about; it's the booze, I suppose."

The following day Loughtry disappeared, and he was gone for almost a week. Branton saw him the evening of his return in Loughtry's rooms. Loughtry had been working, there was a finished story on his desk.

"Turn out a new one?" Branton asked.

Loughtry was maudlin. He picked up the manuscript, glanced at it, tossed it aside.

"Forget—wh-what it's about," he said.

He seemed to be in a sort of stupor. John Branton undressed him and put him to bed. Then he went to his own room, and took the story with him.

He had no intention at first of committing a literary theft. He merely wanted to read the latest work of Marmaduke Loughtry and find wherein was the spark of success. It was a short story of ordinary length, badly written, yet with the human note striking through it. John Branton, almost unconsciously, sat down before his desk and began to rewrite it, correcting mistakes in English, changing a name here and there. It was almost dawn when he had finished, and he read it over.

"That's the way I'd have written it," he told himself. "Now it is in decent English, and it also has 'punch'."

And then Temptation whispered in his ear. Why not send out that story as his own? He had changed the names and a few of the minor incidents. And it was probable that Marmaduke Loughtry had forgotten it. If he had not he would think that he had lost it while under the influence of liquor.

Branton could send it to some magazine that Loughtry did not honor with his work. Loughtry never would see the story, perhaps, if it was printed. For Loughtry did not read the work of others, nor did he watch the market.

Branton changed the title, put his own name and address on the manuscript, sealed it in an addressed envelope, and walked to the corner and mailed it. As he heard the envelope strike the

bottom of the letter box, he realized what he had done. He had stolen somebody's brain-work. He had committed one of the unpardonable crimes. There was only one worst literary crime—selling to an editor of a magazine a mutilated copy of a story that had been published in another.

But John Branton shrugged his shoulders and tried to tell himself that he was justified. Loughtry would not care; he would not know. He had no pride in his work. And, if Branton could sell this one story, it might serve to aid him in selling others. Perhaps Marmaduke Loughtry was but helping him to get near the editorial chieftains.

He saw Loughtry the following evening, and Loughtry said nothing about the story. His desk was in a mess, and Branton doubted whether Loughtry knew for certain that there had been a story. In fact, Loughtry seemed to be puzzled about something.

"Can't remember whether I mailed it or not," he told Branton. "I believe I wrote one. Must have mailed it, I guess. Doesn't make any difference anyway."

Branton felt a little safer after that, especially since Loughtry started on another spree. The days passed swiftly, and now and then Loughtry disappeared, to return more shaky and seedy than ever.

Then there came a day when John Branton received from the editor of the magazine a letter and a check. The story had been accepted. The editor would like to see more of John Branton's work.

Branton cashed the check and then went out upon the streets and walked for two hours as if stepping on clouds. It was almost as if he had accomplished the thing without help. He ceased to think of Loughtry. He told himself that the story would not have sold if he had not polished it up. He knew that was a lie, that it was the ability of Marmaduke Loughtry to touch the human heart that had sold the story, yet he strove to convince himself.

He planned more stories, and worked hard each night at his desk! Loughtry had said nothing more about the story, and Branton knew that Loughtry believed he had lost the manuscript. Loughtry was working on another, too.

Branton had sold the story to a weekly publication, and it soon was published. He saw his

name in print at last, for he had not used a pseudonym. It was his name in print that Branton wanted, more than the money.

He read the story half a dozen times, and his fears disappeared. Surely Loughtry would not see the magazine; if he did he would not read it. The title had been changed, the names of the characters, the formations of sentences here and there, and the introductory paragraph was new, entirely the work of John Branton.

As a murderer returns to the scene of his crime, so Branton went to the rooms of Marmaduke Loughtry that evening. He was eager to see whether Loughtry had any suspicions. He found that Loughtry was not at home. His desk was a mass of mused-up papers, his door not even locked.

"He went out late last night," the landlady told Branton. "I suppose the poor man is drinking again. Where he gets the stuff, I don't know. He must have some great sorrow in his life, Mr. Branton, and perhaps we should not blame him. I do not worry about it; his rent is paid months in advance."

So John Branton felt secure. Even if Loughtry saw the story, Branton would declare it to be his own, would say that he had told the plot to Loughtry while he was intoxicated, and he probably had thought afterward that it was one of his own.

"I'll take care of him when I am rich and famous," Branton told himself. "All that I wanted was a start."

That seemed to be true, for he had sold another story. He did not know that the editor had bit his lip when he purchased it, and had put it aside—probably never to be published. The editor was experienced, and knew that new writers generally make a fizzle of their second story, but may "come back" strong with the third; and the editor, believing that he had discovered John Branton, naturally wanted his magazine to profit by the discovery.

So Branton continued to work at his clerk's desk by day, and wrote during the evenings, and wondered what had become of Loughtry, who had been gone for four days now.

Then one evening, just at dusk, as Branton was walking home and trying to think of a new plot, two men stepped from behind a clump of

brush in a little park and confronted him.

"We want to see you," one of them said. "You'll just take a little walk with us. Thought that you could get away with it, did you? You've sent up the river a better man than you'll ever be. Your double cross worked all right, but we're not done with you. Step lively and make it quiet!"

John Branton felt the muzzle of a revolver jammed against his ribs.

"Wh-what's the matter?" Branton queried, gasping. "I—I don't know what you mean. You're making a mistake."

"You call yourself John Branton, don't you?"

"Yes."

And you wrote a story called 'Seven Times Seven,' didn't you, which was printed last week in a magazine?"

"Yes. But what has that to do—"

"That's all we want to know," the spokesman told him. "And now let me drop a little hint in your dainty ear—we're going away from here, down where we can talk things over, and the first break you make, at the first sound out of you, you're going to get a portion of red-hot lead through an important part of your system. Get that? And don't think we won't do it."

"But, what—"

"And we are starting right this minute, so no more talk out of you unless you are ready to be shuffled off. This dark little park is a fine place for a murder."

John Branton shuddered at the whispered words of this man, at the feel of the revolver muzzle against his ribs. He seemed unable to make a defense of any sort. They guided him along one of the narrow paths, cut across a clearing, skirted a group of trees, and so came to a side street where there was in waiting a taxicab with the curtains at the windows drawn.

John Branton was forced to get into the cab, and it was driven away swiftly. Branton could not even guess at the direction after half a dozen turnings. A man sat on either side of him in menacing silence, and the muzzle of the revolver was still jammed against his ribs. He tried once to speak, tried to ask for an explanation, but they ordered him to remain silent, threatening dire things if he did not hold his tongue.

Branton never had been a courageous man and he felt genuine fear now. He could not

understand this. What did the story have to do with it? These men were not officers of the law arresting him for stealing Marmaduke Loughtry's story. They had said something about him "double crossing" them.

While he was trying to solve the puzzle for himself the taxicab stopped, and he was forced to get out. The cab was driven away immediately. John Branton found that they had brought him to a dark place near the bank of the river in the warehouse district. There was little light; no human being was in sight save his two captors. It was a dismal place, made more so by the constant lapping of the water against the piling, and the hissing of the river breeze.

Fear clutched at John Branton's heart again as they grasped him by the arms and forced him to walk along a wharf. Near the end of it was a row-boat. They forced Branton to get in, and while one of them held the revolver against his side the other took up the oars and began to row.

It was so dark that Branton did not know where they were going, except that it was upstream. Twice he tried to talk, to ask for an explanation, and always he received a whispered threat and a command to remain silent.

Finally the boat bumped against some obstruction, and the man who had been rowing gave a peculiar whistle. Light flooded the scene. John Branton saw that they had reached a little houseboat.

They forced him inside. He blinked his eyes for a moment at the bright light. Two other men were in the houseboat, evil-looking men, thugs in appearance and reality.

"So you got 'im," one of them snarlingly commented.

"We got him," declared the man who had been holding the pistol against John Branton's ribs. "It was a lot of trouble, but I guess we can make him pay for it, all right."

Branton collapsed into a chair and looked up at them.

"You—you've made a mistake," he said.

"I guess not. You keep your trap shut. We'll give you a chance to talk after we are done—not that it will do you any good to tell a stack of lies."

"But what have I done?"

"Shut up! You know what you've done. But no man ever will say that this gang didn't give a

fellow every chance in the world. I'll tell you what you've done, and I don't want a word out of you until I have finished. Then you can say your piece—and little good it will do you.

"The boss has been caught with the goods, and he goes up the river for a ten stretch; you did that. Another good man goes with him, you did that. The gang has been scattered, and we're all in danger; you did all of that. And you're going to pay—understand? There's only one price.

"Silence—until I am done. Where the boss picked you up I don't know. I never saw you before tonight, neither did any of the others here. All we know is what the boss told us, that he had picked up a man with brains, a man who could gather information for us that no other man could get, and could get it to us in a way the police would never discover.

"Oh, you were an odd duck! You wouldn't associate with the others, you only met the boss once in a great while; said it would be dangerous, and might fix it so you couldn't do your work. You'd spot a crib and make the lay, and then you'd write a story and have it printed in a magazine; and the boss would read it, and in it you'd tell him just what to do. We'd do it, and you'd meet the boss and get a slice of the profits, and booze it up.

"It was a pretty plan, but I've been a little uncertain about you from the start. I'm always a little uncertain about you brainy guys. And you boozed, too. It didn't look good to me, but you certainly delivered the goods for a time.

"And then you met the boss and said that you were planning the biggest stunt of all. When you had it planned, you'd write another story and tell us what to do. You told the boss that the story might be printed in any one of a dozen magazines that had agreed not to change your stuff without permission—giving him the list—and that it might be under another name because you were getting scared.

"That was all right, of course. All we knew was that the story would have a certain plot—something to do with seven criminals. In the story you were going to make the criminals do exactly as we were to do as soon as we had read it. We couldn't mistake the story, even though we didn't know what name you'd write it under. The personal descriptions of some of your characters

resembled what the boss told you about some of us too closely to be mistaken. We knew the crib to be cracked, of course. There remained one thing: you was to let us know in the story what night of the week the regular watchman had off and his nephew—a youngster easy to handle—was to be in his place. We were to know that from the name of your hero. If his name began with the letter A, it would be Sunday night, B would be Monday, and so on to G for Saturday night.

"Well, you named him Covington. That meant Tuesday night, didn't it? And you double crossed us. The regular watchman was on duty. He put up a great fight. He made such a fuss that the boss and one of the boys got nabbed with the goods, and we got away by making a run and a scrap out of it. You double crossed us, and I suppose the cops paid you to do it. You stool pigeon!"

John Branton was gasping in fear and wonder now. Of course, when he had stolen Marmaduke Loughtry's story, he had changed the names in it. The name of the hero had been Datton, and he had changed it to Covington. And, if what this man said was the truth, that change had sent two men to jail and had scattered a band of criminals.

"Well, you got anything to say?" he was asked.

"I didn't do it," Branton screeched. "I didn't write that story in the first place."

"Going to try to lie out of it, are you? Small good it will do you, you stool pigeon! The boss told us he didn't know what name you might be going under. He supposed you had changed it, especially after the double cross. He just had a chance to whisper to us as they took him from the courtroom back to jail. 'Get that writer man!' he told us, and we have."

"I didn't do it! I—I stole that story."

"I suppose so," the spokesman said.

"I stole it from a man named Loughtry, who lived in the same house. He was drunk all the time. I stole it, and sent it to the magazine. I'm a clerk."

"You admitted, when we first got you, that you wrote the story, and that's all we need to know. Don't try to lie out of it now. I don't know anything about Loughtry; you might have used that name once. I do know that you're the man we want. One of the boys got your address in the

magazine office, though he had a deuce of a time doing it. And we watched for you and picked you up. I know you work as a clerk, but that's a blind."

"I'm innocent; I changed that name, but I didn't know it meant anything."

"We don't care to hear any more, I guess. We finish you, and then we scatter. You'll tip nothing more off to the police. We're going to finish you right here."

"I tell you I didn't—" Branton began shrieking.

The spokesman made a sign, and they fell upon him. In an instant, almost, he was bound and gagged. They lashed him to the chair, and lashed the chair to a corner of the houseboat.

"We've got to scatter, so we don't need this ship any more," the spokesman said. "And we're not making a present of a houseboat to anybody, and so we'll destroy her, and you along with her. You stool pigeon!"

John Branton mouthed the gag and tried to speak, but only choked himself.

He worked frantically at his bonds and found that none of the knots would give. He was utterly helpless.

From a box in one corner of the boat one of the men carried half a dozen sticks of dynamite. He placed them on the table, within two feet of John Branton's face, and connected them with a small black box. From the box came a ticking sound. Branton knew what that meant; he was face to face with an infernal machine.

"You'll have about ten minutes to think about it," the spokesman said, sneering into his face. "You've tipped off your last man to the police, you stool pigeon!"

They stood before him, grinned at him, then scurried through the door like so many rats, and were gone. John Branton, helpless, was alone in the houseboat. On the table was the dynamite, and the little black box that ticked. Beside it the lamp flickered.

Branton was almost insane with terror now. He hoped that the lamp would not go out; it seemed safer with it burning. The terror of death was upon him. He wanted to fight, and he could not. He could only wait, listening to that sinister ticking.

Shots, oaths, the sounds of a struggle! Feet pounded on the deck of the houseboat. The door was thrown open, and two policemen stumbled in. One grasped the little black box and the dynamite, ran to the door again, then hurled the things far out into the stream. There came a gigantic explosion. But John Branton did not hear it, he was insensible of the wave that rocked the houseboat. He was in a dead faint.

"—don't know what we've got against you, unless it was stealing that story." The voice seemed to come from a distance. Branton opened his eyes and saw that it was a sergeant of police speaking. "I suppose we should thank you because your theft helped us break up a gang that's been terrorizing the city for almost a year. Lucky thing for you. We'd been watching that chap Loughtry. The other day he drank too much and stepped in front of a truck. And before he died yesterday afternoon he called us and told all that he knew. He explained how he had tipped off things by means of stories.

"We didn't know anything about you, and neither did Loughtry know you had stolen his story. We came down here to land the rest of the gang, and overheard their little conversation with you. Feel like standing up now? Can you walk? Better get home then."

Every year, new writers—honest, hard-working men—are achieving success. Names never seen in print before become well known. But among them is never found the name of John Branton.

Branton is a clerk in a mercantile establishment. And he will tell you that the man who steals a story little knows what he may be doing.