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in Taffeta

BEN BENSON



BOLLINS

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First published 1955 ·
First issued in Fontana Books, 1957

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

COLLINS CLEAR-TYPE PRESS : LONDON AND GLASGOW

CHAPTER I

WHEN HE CAME into Wellington Police Headquarters it was ten minutes past nine p.m. It was a warm May night and at the high desk they were booking a ragged, emaciated drunk with a dirty, sweating face and a reek of sour wine coming from him.

Paris walked by the desk to the worn wooden stairway. There was an airless odour of dust and disinfectant, of stale cigar smoke. He went up the stairs. The wood was rotted and the boards creaked under his tread. On the second floor the corridor was littered with cigarette butts, scraps of paper, gum wrappings. In comparison, he thought of an army barracks, or even the State Police Barracks at Bridgewater with its spit and polish and its inspections. But it's not the fault of the Wellington cops, he thought. They don't live in like soldiers and state troopers do. There's no pride in housekeeping, and there's always a steady traffic of sordid flotsam and jetsam, and the custodial help is always political.

There was a door of frosted glass and on it were the words, DETECTIVE BUREAU. Paris opened it. Near the door a thick-browed, heavy-faced detective was seated at a small oak desk, typing a report with two fingers. He was in wrinkled shirtsleeves and his shoulderholster was strapped tightly under his armpit. The typing stopped. The detective said, "You can go right

in, Inspector—" He flicked his head to the closed door at the rear of the room. " Captain Madera's expecting you."

" Thanks," Paris said. He crossed the room. Along the wall there was a wooden bench, its arms worn, the finish rubbed off long ago by nervous, fearful, sweating hands.

A woman sat on the bench. She was small and sixtyish, lumpish and almost shapeless, with a toil-worn, wrinkled face and stringy grey hair. She wore an old blue coat that had been mended near one buttonhole. Underneath it was the skirt of a neat, starched house-dress. Her low shoes were polished, but the leather was shabby, and the shoelaces broken and tied in knots. Her hands were in her lap and she was twisting them, the knuckles red, rough and arthritic. Her eyes came up to Paris, staring at him with watery, pathetic hopelessness.

" You come to see me? " she asked timidly.

" No, ma'am," Paris said. " Captain Madera."

" Oh," she whispered. She looked down at her hands, squeezing them hard. " He's in there."

Paris opened the door. The desk was in the corner near the single dusty window. Captain Walter Madera sat behind it. He wore a neat blue suit and a neat blue tie. His face was sallow in the yellow light of the desk lamp, the jowls of his narrow face showing the blue-black sheen of a heavy beard. He was forty-three years old. His black hair was glossy, but thinning rapidly, giving him an exaggerated widow's peak. His eyelids had been drooping, half-closed, when Paris came in. Now he opened them. His eyes were dark and liquid.

" Hi," he said. " Sit down, Wade." His face was rigid,

the muscles hard in his jaw. "I called you because I might have something for you on Peter Augustine."

"I was hoping that," Paris said. He drew a chair over, sat down and waited. He had been in southeastern Massachusetts, in the city of Wellington, over a week, reporting in from State Police Headquarters in Boston. He had come at the request of the local district attorney, whose staff was inadequate to investigate the self-styled financier, Peter Augustine. Augustine, originally from Chicago, had been in Wellington five years. With Augustine had come a sudden influx of hard-eyed hoodlums, seen nightly now at the local bars and night clubs. And with Augustine and the hoodlums had come the sudden business of loan-sharking and usury.

During the daytime the hard-eyed men could be seen at the gates of the woollen mills and at the Whiting Electric Cable Company, transacting their miserable business—the six for five business. Loan you five to-day, pay me back six on Friday. Loan you a hundred, pay me back a hundred and twenty next week. Small loans to small people. But then Woolworth made millions, too, and, at first, he never sold an article over a dime.

There were a great many little people, desperate people, and they always needed money. Some needed it for the bookie, or the numbers operator, or for the sure thing in the fifth at Narragansett. Another needed money for a diamond engagement ring, because Doris says if a girl is engaged she should have a ring, and you're only making fifty-three dollars a week at the mill and a slice of it goes out for withholding tax and union dues

and social security. These were some of Augustine's customers.

There were many others, too. There was the insurance collector who was short this week on his accounts and borrowed from Augustine to balance his books—and next week he was in deeper. There was the man whose wife needed an operation. There was the small businessman whose back was to the wall and his credit exhausted, who thought if he could hold on three more months, business would be better, the mills would put on a second shift, the defence contracts would increase. There was the young housewife who had lost her house-money at a poker game and couldn't face her husband. These were Augustine's customers.

There was a high ratio of defaults on payments. And the Augustine octopus, dealing in human misery, reached out, enfolded, choked, and took over. The cleansing shops, the small restaurants, the small bars and night clubs.

And the small delinquent accounts, the ones without assets or businesses, paid, too. They always paid Augustine. The collection method was the small-claims court of the back alley. The knee in the stomach, the leaded club, the brass knuckles, the ruptured kidney. It was not good advertising to allow an Augustine customer to default. The relatives paid, or the delinquent stole from his employer or held up a gas station. Augustine had to collect, one way or another.

Yet, coming into Wellington the week before, Paris had found nothing but a stone wall of silence, the blank stare, the shrug of the shoulder. When he spoke to assault and battery victims in the accident ward of the

hospital they mumbled about unseen assailants, unless their fractured jaws were wired and they were unable to say anything. Muggers, some of them would say evasively. But muggers did not allow their victims to keep their wallets. Paris, prodding, pleading, threatening, got nowhere.

Because, Paris thought, in five years Augustine had acquired control. Augustine, wise in crime and in years, was in at the top. The Augustines always worked from the top. There was always a high police official or a prominent politician who would take a buck. In almost any town you had the buck takers. Without them organised crime could not last three days.

So there it was.

Captain Madera took out a cigarette. A match flared. Blue smoke wreathed up. He said, "You asked for a lead, Wade. Any kind at all."

"Anything," Paris said. "A lever. Something to pry up the stone so I can get a look at the worms crawling underneath."

Madera drew in smoke. "All I have is a wild stab. Did you see the old lady sitting outside?"

"I saw her," Paris said.

"Her name's Mrs. Buell. Her husband, Henry, has been missing since five o'clock to-night. He owed Augustine a lot of money."

"If Mrs. Buell will talk—"

The smoke curled out from Madera's nostrils. "Hell, she won't tell me much. Everybody thinks the whole Wellington P.D. is on Augustine's payroll. Maybe she'll talk to you, Wade. Then again—" he shrugged his shoulders—"her husband's disappearance might not

mean a thing. There's nothing from the hospitals. I've sent out an all-points alert. Then about eleven o'clock the husband will show up from a lodge meeting. He forgot to tell his wife, or she don't remember. It always happens."

"I know," Paris said. "But let's talk to her anyway."

When she came into the room, Madera sat her in a chair near a row of green filing cabinets. He said, "Mrs. Buell, this is Detective-Inspector Paris of the State Police. Do you want to tell him about Henry?"

Her hands gripped her small handbag tightly. "The State Police?" she asked. "Why the State Police, Captain? Something has happened to Henry?"

"No, ma'am," Paris said. He was standing against the filing cabinets. "We've found nothing yet. Maybe you can tell us when you spoke to your husband last."

She wrung her hands. There were blue smudges under her eyes. "Half-past four this afternoon. He called me from his shop."

"What kind of shop, Mrs. Buell?"

"We own a little sandwich shop in the Winthrop Building, just off the first-floor lobby. The shop is only for the office trade. Henry closes every day at five."

"He works there alone?" Paris asked.

"Alone. We can't afford help. It's not easy. Henry is sixty-five and it's not good for him to stand on his feet all day on a damp concrete floor. But what can he do? As it is, he barely makes both ends meet."

"What did your husband say when he phoned you at four-thirty?"

"He said he was closing at five sharp. He always phones me. To-night I had something special for him for dinner. A pot roast. Not for six months have we had a pot roast. So after he called, I put on the potatoes. He likes them mashed, with brown gravy—"

Madera, leaning forward in his chair, said, "Your husband left the Winthrop Building at five o'clock. We checked, Mrs. Buell. Now maybe he had an appointment somewhere—"

"Wouldn't he tell me? He never goes anywhere without telling me."

"He may have forgotten," Paris said gently.

"No," she said. She shook her head in silent anguish. "Henry would tell me. He always tells me. My God, why do you waste time like this? Why don't you call up Mr. Augustine? Ask him what he's done with my Henry."

"Peter Augustine?" Paris asked. "Why do you think Augustine had something to do with it?"

"Because," she said tonelessly, "Henry owes Augustine Finance Company four thousand dollars. Tell Mr. Augustine we'll pay the loan. We haven't got the money but we'll give him the shop—"

"The loan was for the shop?" Paris asked.

"Yes. Four thousand dollars. And Henry worked like a dog just to pay the interest on the loan. The interest is so high, we owe interest on interest. That's the system. We'll never be able to pay the principal. Never." She shook her head again. "Mr. Augustine wants the whole thing now. We don't have it. Business is not good. But Mr. Augustine threatened Henry he'd better pay it."

Paris moved closer to her. He bent forward. "That's what we want to know, Mrs. Buell. When was your husband threatened?"

"Last week."

"Did you hear Augustine threaten him?"

"No. How could I hear him? He called Henry at the shop. But Henry told me about it when he came home. He was so frightened he could hardly breathe. He wouldn't eat anything that night. He just stared at the door, expecting any minute Mr. Augustine would come in and kill him."

"Didn't you know Augustine was a loan-shark?" Paris asked. "That he was an ex-racketeer from Chicago?"

"Yes, we knew," she said distantly.

"And you applied for a loan anyway." Paris took a deep breath. "How much interest did Augustine charge?"

"Three per cent a month on the original principal."

"Thirty-six per cent a year," Paris said. "Which is about thirty per cent more than from a legitimate bank. Then when you default on your interest there's a charge. You owe him more and more. You pay out thousands in interest and never touch the principal. Dammit, Mrs. Buell, didn't you know it?"

"What could we do? We had a small loan from the Wellington National Bank. We needed more. The bank wouldn't give it. We had no security. Without the money from Mr. Augustine we couldn't open up the shop."

"It would be better if you didn't," Paris said. "Any bank would have told you so. Any financial adviser."

"I know," she whispered. "But it's gone, it's past. I only care about Henry now."

"Now, you care about him," Paris said. "But what about last week? If Augustine threatened him, why didn't you go to the Wellington Police?"

She didn't answer for a long time. Across from her, on the wall, was a calendar with a girl in a Bikini bathing suit. The girl held a garden hose, and in the background there was a yellow Cadillac convertible. The calendar said *Wellington Auto Laundry*. The girl's smile was a coy invitation. The picture was incongruous in the harsh, ill-fitted office.

Mrs. Buell looked at Madera motionless behind his desk. She turned to Paris. "The Wellington Police?" she asked bitterly. "Ask him sitting there. The cops come into the shop and wants eats for free. Ask him if they've ever bothered Mr. Augustine. Ask anybody who's done business with Mr. Augustine. Ask them if they can go to the police."

Madera ground his cigarette viciously into an ash-tray. "Did these people ever complain to the police, Mrs. Buell?" he asked in a hard, brittle voice. "Did any of them come to me? Any one of them?"

"Because they're afraid," she said. "Mr. Augustine would hurt them, harm their families." Her head bent quickly and she brought her hands up to cover her face.

Paris moved over and patted the bowed shoulders. "Now, now," he said. "Don't you worry about anything, Mrs. Buell. Maybe your husband came home and you don't know it."

"I left word with the neighbours," she whispered, her eyes wet. "I left him a note I'd be here."

"We'll take you home," Paris said. "It's not very comfortable waiting here. Do you have anybody who could come and sit with you?"

"Nobody. I have a daughter. But she's a nurse in San Francisco. I have nobody else."

"Well, maybe by the time we get you home, Henry will already be there."

"No," she said tonelessly. She put her hand on her breast. "In here I have a feeling. Henry is dead."

CHAPTER II

IT WAS A mustard yellow, three-story frame tenement, with long, ugly piazzas running the width of the front. The hallway was dark, narrow, ill-lighted. Mrs. Buell led them up to the third floor, her breath labouring. She unlocked the door with fumbling fingers.

"Henry," she called.

There was no answer. The house was dark. Mrs. Buell found a switch near the door. The lights came on.

Paris noted quickly a bronze lamp, its shade of brocaded velvet with old-fashioned tassels. Velour overstuffed furniture. An immaculate, ornately carved upright piano. An ancient hand-crank Victrola. Heavy old velvet curtains. Everything very old. Everything spotless.

She went from one room to another, calling Henry. In the kitchen she stopped and leaned against the shiny black stove with its glistening nickel trim.

"The pot roast," she said, almost inaudibly. "We've been looking forward to it for such a long time. It's all dried up now. But I can make you some tea. Stay with me, please."

"I'm sorry," Paris said. "But we can't stay. Mrs. Buell, you must have some neighbour—"

"Why should I bother them?" she said heavily. "I'll be all right."

"We'll keep in touch with you, Mrs. Buell," said Madera. "And if Henry comes home before you hear from us, will you please phone my office?"

She nodded silently, her hands helpless by her sides, her eyes wandering about the empty tomb of a house.

Paris and Madera went outside. The uniformed patrolman-driver opened the door of the police sedan. In the back-seat, Madera said, "What now?"

Paris moved in beside him, half-listening. He didn't answer. He was thinking of the tidiness of the flat, of the old, prized possessions. Finally he said, "She's all alone up there, Walt. It's not good."

"I'll send a man over," Madera said. "What else, Wade?"

Paris lifted his wrist. His watch said 9.45. "I want to see Peter Augustine."

Madera looked at him for a long time. "Why? What will it buy you?"

"Nothing for me. But if Augustine hasn't done anything yet, and he's thinking of it, it might make him change his mind."

Madera took out a cigarette and lit it with the match cupped in his hand. "You going to tell him that, Wade?"

"Yes."

Madera thought for a moment. "It's Tuesday night. Augustine will be at the Pink Elephant. It's one of the clubs he owns."

"Then you can drop me there."

"Don't you want me with you?"

"Sure, Walt," Paris said. "But I thought you might have something else—"

"No, I'll go with you, Wade. I want to see you talk to Augustine. Maybe I'd enjoy it. Maybe it'll stop me from spitting at myself in the mirror."

"As bad as that, Walt?"

"For chrissakes, every time I've gone to see Augustine it's been with my hat in my hand and my feet wiped carefully on the doormat. There was no other way I could do it. Understand? Otherwise I'd be pounding a beat out in Fairlawn."

"I understand," Paris said. "Walt, I'll ask you only once and we'll both forget it. And there'll be no hard feelings if you don't hear me."

"I know your question, Wade, but I don't know the answer. You want me to tell you who's in back of Augustine, who's holding his hand. I don't know. It's somebody big, somebody at the top. But they've got it too well covered. I don't even know how they meet. Maybe out of town." Madera flipped his cigarette out of the window. "Was that your question?"

Paris smiled. "Yes. Now let's go see Augustine."

The doorman standing under the canopy of the Pink Elephant loomed large in the darkness. Paris, having left the car with Madera, came up close, noticing the