

# The Drawer in the Writing Table

By Joseph Ivers Lawrence

Illustrated by R. Tandler.



VERNON MOORE was hungry. In the living-room of his bachelor suite there was a Daghestan carpet on the floor, the heavy, "mannish" furniture was of honest mahog-

any, and an electrolier shaded by favrille glass threw a mellow glow upon the excellent prints and etchings that carried out the reds and browns of the general decorative scheme. But among all the things that made his lodgings so pleasantly habitable there was nothing edible.

Moore was very hungry. It was early evening, and he had not eaten a morsel of food since early morning. It was a non-housekeeping apartment, and the occupant was supposed to obtain his meals at his club or a restaurant.

The average man in Moore's physical condition would have solved the problem simply and quickly by clapping on his hat and walking around the corner to the excellent restaurant on Fifth avenue. Moore, however, gave no thought to such a procedure. He had no charge account at the restaurant, and in all the world of finance he possessed not so much as the price of an evening newspaper.

He intended to sleep—if sleep would come graciously to his relief—on the tapestry-valanced Flemish bedstead in his sleeping chamber; but it would be his last night of such luxury. The furniture dealer, whose charges for fitting up and embellishing the suite had not been met within the time agreed upon, held a protective lien upon all the chattels, and was removing them in the morning. This was, in a way, a fortuitous convenience, for Moore's landlord had requested him firmly to remove the things on the following day, and the furniture dealer had the means of effecting the removal, while Moore had not.

Three months earlier, with a more than comfortable salary and no tangible fears for the morrow, Moore had settled in the handsome apartment with agreeable conceptions of the life of a well-fed New York bachelor; but the salary had vanished with the business that was its source, and the times were so out of joint that no other salary, large or small, could be conjured up by any of the abracadabra incantations known to commercial sorcery.

With optimistic nonchalance Moore had continued to live in the apartment and eat the delicacies of the season at recognized hostelrys until his store of money was reduced to pocketbook dimensions; then he sought out the exotic little side-street restaurants which offered the largest quantity of strong-flavored food and thin, red wine for 50 or 60 cents.

His last meal had consisted of three crullers and a mug of coffee, thrust at him over a stained marble counter, and his last nickel had paid for it. That was after he had left the early morning steamboat from Boston, where he had been running down a will-o'-the-wisp clew to a fabled position.

When the clew had ended in the rarefied air of Tremont street, he had counted his remaining shekels and found enough to buy the steamboat passage back to New York, where New Yorkers choose to die when they cannot live there or elsewhere.

Moore's telephone service was "cut off," so far as calls from his end of the line were concerned; but he gave a start of nervousness rather than surprise when the bell of the apparatus jingled.

"Ah!" he exclaimed with a wry smile. "Perhaps some impecunious friend wants to borrow money. Always glad to accommodate friends, but—"

He moved wearily across the room and picked up the receiver. He recognized at once the familiar tones of the negro hall-boy downstairs.

"Oh, yes; I am in, Jack," he replied to a query. "At least I suspect myself strongly of being in. Who is the person that is so kindly inquiring?"

"What's that? A gentleman from Cobb, Frost & Cobb, the jewelers. Why, I never had anything char—I mean, I haven't had any dealings with that firm. Isn't it Mr.

"It's quite all right," said Moore tersely, waving him into the room and closing the door. "Sit down, won't you? You've brought the—er—"



"Step into that room—quick!"

Frank F. Moore, across the hall, that the man wants to see?"

The hallboy answered presently that the visitor had merely the name and address—"Mr. Moore, Luxoria Apartments," and that he said Mr. Moore had ordered certain articles sent to him on approval from the jewelry shop. The boy added that Mr. Frank Moore was out for the evening, he believed.

As Vernon Moore listened, he stiffened suddenly, and a hard, keen look flashed into his eyes. He stepped back from the instrument a pace and glanced nervously about the room, while the hand which held the receiver trembled slightly.

The hallboy, mistaking his silence, started to repeat the explanation, whereupon Moore whirled sharply back and interrupted him.

"Oh! Why, of course, Jack!" he exclaimed. "How stupid I am tonight! The man from Cobb, Frost & Cobb, certainly. Send him right up, won't you?"

With that he banged the receiver into place hurriedly. He knew that it would take the visitor thirty seconds to make the ascent in the elevator, but he moved with unwonted haste.

Darting to the large writing table in the middle of the room, he jerked open an upper drawer and whipped out an automatic pistol. He satisfied himself that it was loaded, then slipped it into the side pocket of his coat, and with that done he faced the outer door and listened for the rattle of the elevator.

The expected sound reached him, then the grating of the sliding door, a footfall in the tiled corridor, and the trill of the doorbell.

"Good evening," Moore said coolly, as he swung wide the door. "You are from Cobb, Frost & Cobb? All right; come in."

The man was apparently about 40 years old, spare of frame, and of a humble demeanor that was almost servile.

"I hope I haven't kept you in this evening, Mr. Moore," he said timorously. "I expected to get here much earlier; but I hardly knew, you see. I thought you might be dining at your club—something like that, you know."

"Yes, sir; I have the set of studs in my bag, Mr. Moore," the man answered, declining to sit down, and placing his small satchel on the writing table in order to keep it in sight. "I believe \$950 was the price quoted, was it not?"

"Um—er—yes, \$950," Moore drawled. "I want to look them over again carefully; things appear so vastly different out of the shop, you know."

The man knitted his brows slightly, as though the idea of any delay was distasteful to him. He took a square, vellum-covered box from the bag and snapped open the cover, disclosing three shirt studs, five waistcoat buttons, and a pair of cuff-links; all in exquisite platinum filigree, and each one set with a handsome Oriental pearl.

"I suppose you have to call on other customers this evening," remarked Moore casually; "so few people are at home in the daytime, and they don't like such business brought into their offices. I dare say you carry quite a precious cargo in that small bag."

Without appearing actually suspicious, the man snapped the bag shut and laid the case of studs on the table.

"No," he said slowly. "Oh, no, I never carry very many articles of great value at one time. It wouldn't be safe, you know. Now, Mr. Moore, if these are satisfactory, I will—that is, I don't like to hurry you, sir; but I will be going as soon as possible. I have—er—another engagement this evening—yes, another business engagement—rather important."

"Ah, yes; I understand," replied Moore. "I won't keep you long. It's a very handsome set, isn't it?"

He picked up the vellum case and held it under the light of the electrolier, turning it to various angles and examining the studs with critical care.

"I feel a trifle undecided about them," he murmured presently. "You see, platinum and pearls—rather a cold effect, you know. I wonder if I'd like a touch of gold a little better. The platinum work is very beautiful; perhaps a colored stone—something warmer—a touch of fire would liven up the design."

The jeweler's man had backed away from the table, and now stood on the

hearth rug, hands clasped behind him, rocking upon the balls of his feet in an agitated manner.

"Perhaps you'd rather I didn't leave them now, sir," he said coldly. "You may like to drop in at the shop again, sir, and discuss the matter with one of our experts."

"No, I don't think that's necessary," replied Moore easily. "I want to be sure that I like them, that's all. Now, they had a set of sapphire buttons in a window on Fifth avenue the other day; I stopped and looked at them for a minute or two. But, after all, this design is more elegant, I think; there's a little more distinction to it, and I like the quieter effects, anyway."

The man took out his watch without concealing an air of growing anxiety.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, Mr. Moore," he said; "but it's 8:15 now, and my appointment at—"

"Oh, I'm sure your watch is a trifle fast," protested Moore almost jocularly. "Let me look at the clock on the Metropolitan tower; I can see it from my window."

He laid down the vellum case, stepped over to the window, raised the shade, and peered out into the night. And while his back was turned the nervous visitor became still more nervous, and with noiseless tread made a rapid little journey from the hearth rug to the drawer in the writing table and back again.

When Moore turned around, the man was standing in the same position on the rug.

"You were right," admitted Moore with a laugh; "it's 8:16 now. I shouldn't question the accuracy of a jeweler's watch, of course."

"You will keep the studs, Mr. Moore?" asked the man gravely. "I really feel, sir, that I must be going."

Moore suddenly laughed aloud with great good humor.

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"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I believe you jewelry men are inclined to be suspicious of every one. I'm sorry if I've made you nervous. Well, well; I must come to a decision and let you go. Nine hundred and fifty dollars! That's quite a bit of money for a man to be spending on gewgaws for himself, isn't it. It's simply rank extravagance! But I confess I have a fondness for really good jewelry. I suppose, now, that you fellows in the business look upon such things as so much dross. Familiarity breeds contempt, of course. No doubt, if you were wealthy, you would scarcely think of buying such things for yourself."

"Really, Mr. Moore!" the man burst out suddenly. "I don't like to offend you, sir; but I simply can't wait another minute. If you want more time to consider the purchase, I will bring the things back again tomorrow. My appointment is of great importance, and I must be going."

He made a determined stride toward the table, where his hat, his bag, and the vellum case were laid; but Moore, without appearing conscious of the rude action, stepped swiftly in front of him, barring his way, and picked up the case again.

"There's really no time like the present, my friend," he said calmly. "I suppose I can make my decision as well now as any other time. I cannot deny that I admire these buttons immensely. But if they were a bit more—"

"What do you mean by this behavior, Mr. Moore?" demanded the man, now plainly alarmed. "Are you trying to keep me here for any reason? Your actions—really, I must say that they seem very peculiar!"

Moore shut the vellum case with a snap and placed it in his pocket. Then he stood between the man and the door and looked him coldly in the eye.

"Did you ever see me before, my man?" he asked.

The other gasped and fell to trembling. "Why, no; but why should I have seen you?" he quavered. "I am not in the sales department of the shop; I am employed in