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The Face on the Cutting-Room Floor

Written by Cameron McCabe

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Cameron McCabe

**THE FACE ON THE
CUTTING-ROOM FLOOR**

With an introduction by Jonathan Coe

PICADOR CLASSIC



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ONE

He walked in without knocking and began to talk before the door had closed behind him.

‘You have to re-edit the junk,’ he said. Then he coughed and wiped the sweat off his neck. Sweat always showed on his neck, never on his forehead. He was too fat. He loved French pastries and Viennese strudel. It was an unhappy love. You could see him growing fatter and he didn’t like it.

‘Yes, sir,’ I said, ‘and what can I do for your personal comfort?’

He smiled – rather reluctantly – and after a little while he said, still breathing in an unpleasant way: ‘No kidding, Mac. Cut it out. Cut out the girl.’

‘Sir,’ I said, ‘my client’s reputation is spotless. He is happily married and there is no other woman in his life.’

He interrupted, somewhat too quickly, shouting: ‘Stop it.’

Then he looked round, vaguely and without aim, and when he continued speaking his voice was tired.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘check that witty brain of yours, it’s running away with you. Now listen: you must cut out that Estella girl, every scene with her, I can’t have her, the picture’s too long. You must cut it down to seven thousand feet. I’ll send Robertson to help, and between the two of you you can do some juggling with your scissors and celluloid. You like it, don’t you? What you say?’

‘It smells,’ I said.

He frowned. The skin of his forehead moved like skin on boiling milk. Then he smiled again.

‘You’re right,’ he said, ‘it smells. I should describe it as a singularly ripe piece of cheese.’

‘The girl’s got looks –’ I said.

‘– like a show-window dummy in a beauty parlour,’ he said.

‘She’s all right,’ I said. ‘You wait and see. She’s nineteen.’

‘She’s a wow!’ he shouted. ‘Bottle it.’ Then, quietly and almost apologetically, a quick association of word and meaning: ‘You got a drink?’

I quoted: ‘Studio Regulations, Number Seven, Paragraph Four: “It is strictly requested that the –”’

‘Go on,’ he said, ‘say some more. Your brain’s sparkling today. Give me some Scotch.’

I took the bottle and the syphon from under the table.

‘Soda?’ I asked.

‘Straight.’

We sat down and drank.

‘A foul business,’ he said.

After a while he got up and walked about.

‘Right,’ I said, ‘it’s so foul it smells like your singularly ripe cheese. You can’t catch rats with that. But I’m smelling a rat. Why do you want to cut her out?’

‘None of your business,’ he said.

I stood up and walked over to him.

He did not turn to face me.

I had to address his back.

‘Now listen, Mr Bloom,’ I said to his back. ‘Let’s get this straight. You are the boss of this pot-house. You are the producer and I’m the chief cutter, and if you say, “Cut,” I cut. But if you ask me to cut the other woman out of a triangle story and make it a straight honeymoon for two, then I’m just itching to hand you the scissors and let you try it for yourself.’

He looked at me over his shoulder with a tension in the muscles of his jaw. It was interesting to watch the movements which happened on his face.

‘Because you see,’ I said, ‘what you want isn’t cutting: it’s a jigsaw puzzle. Robertson is a fine cutter, but if you cut out the point

of a story there won't be a story left, and no Robertson and no McCabe's going to get you out of that rat-trap.'

He smiled. Then he said: 'Yes, sir, and what can I do for your personal comfort? Something is wrong with you. Sounds pretty serious. Must be the nerves. You'd better see a specialist.'

'I'll have to,' I said.

'Ring up Robertson,' he said, turned and went out.

TWO

I tried to ring Robertson but there was no reply. It was twenty-five past six and I was certain that he was still in his office; I rang again but the line was engaged.

'Blast those switchboard fumlbers,' I said.

Dinah Lee smiled behind her typewriter.

I looked at her and she started to hammer away on the keys.

'What are you playing, my sunshine?' I asked her.

'Tiger Rag,' she said and rattled on.

'Hell,' I said. 'This is no Gin Mill Upright, it's a typewriter.'

'Robertson's in the cutting-room,' she said.

'Which one?'

She said something but I couldn't understand her with the noise of the Remington going on all the time.

I thought he would be in Number Two and I went out. When I passed Bloom's office I heard people shouting inside. There were two voices. One of them, I thought, was Estella's. But I wasn't sure whether it was a rehearsal or some real quarrel.

The lift was not working so I had to walk down all the stairs to the studio. They had *Conversation after Midnight* on Stage A, and on Stage B they were shooting the night-club sequence for *Black and White Blues*. Outside in the yard they were trying some extra scenes for *Peep and Judy Show*, the Inigo Ransom comedy which was long over schedule time. I met the continuity girl from the new studio and I asked her whether she had seen anything of Robertson lately. She was tired and said no she had not and asked me how I was getting on with the cutting of *The Waning Moon*. She was interested in it because she had been floor secretary for the production.

I said I was getting on all right and she said: 'That's good, but

now I must go over to the canteen to get a bite of something, I'm starving.'

I walked across the yard to the new buildings and asked for the Special Effects Department. They were still working there, putting furniture in the offices and wiring the studios for the new high-voltage lamps. The girl in the box was new, I had never seen her before. She was very polite and asked me to sit down while she was trying to find Robertson somewhere. She rang through to Robertson's office but again there was no reply. I said I would walk right up and she showed me the way.

She was pretty and she smelled good.

'What's your name?' I asked her.

She said 'Robertson, May – May Robertson' and smiled.

I looked at her but before I could say anything she said: 'Right. You are a detective: I'm John's sister.'

I thought I ought to be polite too. So I said 'I'm awfully glad' and went upstairs.

The walls smelled of paint and lime and mortar. There was a glass plate on the door:

JOHN ROBERTSON, M.SC., A.R.C.S.
SPECIAL EFFECTS DEPARTMENT
BRITISH AND ALLIED FILM PRODUCTIONS

I knocked. There was no reply. I knocked again and tried the handle. The door opened. I walked in.

It was a large white room, a sort of miniature studio. There were all sorts of lamps: arcs, inkies, jupiter lamps, babies and broads and spots; two cameras, tripods, trolleys, a small truck, and a great collection of screens; niggers, gobos, dollies; focusing boards, number boards, clappers; a cutting-bench with spools, winders, grease pencils, scissors, film cement on it, a film bin with a bin stick on the left hand and a film horse on the right. There was a new

moviola of a very handsome type. There was a new sound-booth with recorder, mike and amplifier complete, and there was the most marvellous gadget-box I had ever seen. It had absolutely everything in it, masks and vignettes and diffusers, apparatus for dunning and back projection, changing bags and tools and everything.

Everybody was talking about Robertson's new Silent-Automatic-Infra. They called it the pride of the Special Effects Department. It was Robertson's own construction, designed and built in the studio, an automatic camera for infra-red light. The thing was miraculous. It was smooth and absolutely noiseless. It worked in light and darkness equally well. There had been a story going round the studio that Robertson had once fixed the camera in the dark-room without the people knowing it and next morning he had shown them the film in his little private theatre. That was the first film anyone had ever taken of work in the dark-room. The studio technicians went mad. For some weeks even the trade journals talked about Robertson.

We didn't like him at first. He was a college boy. So we watched him. But he was all right.

And there was the camera. I went over and looked at it. When I touched the gear it was warm. He must have been working it a short time ago.

I went out to look for him. I tried the cutting-rooms and the head offices, even Bloom's office. He was nowhere.

Then I thought I had better have another look in his room. I knocked and of course there was no reply. Then I banged my head against the door because quite automatically I had tried to open it. But the door had not given way. It was locked.

I was fed up like hell. I had spent twenty-odd minutes trying to see that man Robertson. It was now a quarter to seven and he had left. I had missed him at least three times.

He had been there directly after my first call: I remembered distinctly having heard the *engaged* signal. He had been in his room

shortly before I had first entered: I had found the camera gear still warm. And he had been there again after I had left and now he had locked the shop and gone home.

I cursed him and went out.