

Hit and Run

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Extract

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HIT AND RUN



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Keller drew his pair of tongs from his breast pocket and carefully lifted a stamp from its glassine envelope. It was one of Norway's endless Posthorn series, worth less than a dollar, but curiously elusive, and missing from his collection. He examined it closely, held it to the light to make sure the paper hadn't thinned where a hinge had once secured it to an album page, and returned it to the envelope, setting it aside for purchase.

The dealer, a tall and gaunt gentleman whose face was frozen on one side by what he had explained was Bell's palsy, gave a one-side-of-the-face chuckle. "One thing I like to see," he said, "is a man who carries his own tongs with him. Minute I see that, I know I've got a serious collector in my shop."

Keller, who sometimes had his tongs with him and sometimes didn't, felt it was more a question of memory than seriousness. When he traveled, he always brought along his copy of the Scott catalog, a large 1,100-page volume that listed and illustrated the stamps of the world from the very first issue (Great Britain's Penny Black, 1840) through the initial century of philately and, in the case of the British Empire, including the last of the George VI issues in 1952. These were the stamps Keller collected, and he used the catalog not only for its information but as a checklist,

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deliberately circling each stamp's number in red when he added it to his collection.

The catalog always traveled with him, because there was no way he could shop for stamps without having it at hand. The tongs were useful, but not indispensable; he could always borrow a pair from whoever had stamps to sell him. So it was easy to forget to pack tongs, and you couldn't just tuck a pair in your pocket at the last minute, or slip them in your carry-on. Not if you were going to get on an airplane, because some clown at Security would confiscate them. Imagine a terrorist with a pair of stamp tongs. Why, he could grab the flight attendant and threaten to pluck her eyebrows . . .

It was surprising he'd brought the tongs this time, because he'd almost decided against packing the catalog. He'd worked for this particular client once before, on a job that took him to Albuquerque, and he'd never even had time to unpack. In an uncharacteristic excess of caution, he'd booked three different motel rooms, checked into each of them in turn, then wound up rushing the job on an impulse and flying back to New York the same day without sleeping in any of them. If this job went as quickly and smoothly he wouldn't have time to buy stamps, and who even knew if there were any dealers in Des Moines?

Years ago, when Keller's boyhood stamp collection rarely set him back more than a dollar or two a week, there would have been plenty of dealers in Des Moines, as there were just about everywhere. The hobby was as strong as ever these days, but the street-level retail stamp shop was on the endangered species list, and conservation was unlikely to save it. The business nowadays was all online or mail order, and the few dealers who still operated stores did so more to attract potential sellers than buyers. People with no knowledge of or interest in stamps would pass their shop every day, and when Uncle Fred died and there was a collection to sell, they'd know where to bring it.

This dealer, James McCue by name, had his store occupying the ground-floor front of his home off Douglas Avenue in Urbandale, a suburb whose name struck Keller as oxymoronic. An urban dale? It seemed neither urban nor a dale to Keller, but he figured it was probably a nice enough place to live. McCue's house was around seventy years old, a frame structure with a bay window and an upstairs porch. The dealer sat at a computer, where Keller figured he probably did the greater portion of his business, and a radio played elevator music at low volume. It was a peaceful room, its manageable clutter somehow comforting, and Keller picked through the rest of the Norway issues and found a couple more he could use.

"How about Sweden?" McCue suggested. "I got some real nice Sweden."

"I'm strong on Sweden," Keller said. "At this point the only ones I need are the ones I can't afford."

"I know what that's like. How about numbers one to five?"

"Surprisingly enough, I don't have them. But then I don't have the three skilling orange, either." That stamp, cataloged as number 1a, was an error of color, orange instead of blue green, and was presumably unique; a specimen had changed hands a few years ago for three million dollars. Or maybe it was euros, Keller couldn't remember.

"Haven't got that fellow," McCue said, "but I've got one through five, and the price is right." And, when Keller raised his eyebrows, he added, "The official reprints. Mint, decent centering, and lightly hinged. Book says they're worth \$375 apiece. Want to have a look?"

He didn't wait for an answer but sorted through a file box and came up with a stock card holding the five stamps behind a protective sheet of clear plastic.

"Take your time, look 'em over carefully. Nice, aren't they?"

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“Very nice.”

“You could fill those blank spaces with these and never need to apologize for them.”

And if he ever did acquire the originals, which seemed unlikely, the set of reprints would still deserve a place in his collection. He asked the price.

“Well, I wanted seven-fifty for the set, but I guess I’ll take six hundred. Save me the trouble of shipping ’em.”

“If it was five,” Keller said, “I wouldn’t have to think about it.”

“Go ahead and think it through,” McCue said. “I wouldn’t really care to go lower than six. I can take a credit card, if that makes it easier.”

It made it easier, all right, but Keller wasn’t sure he wanted to take that route. He had an American Express card in his own name, but he hadn’t used his own name at all this trip, and figured he’d just as soon keep it that way. And he had a Visa card he’d used to rent the Nissan Sentra from Hertz, and to register at the Days Inn, and the name on it was Holden Blankenship, which matched the Connecticut drivers’ license in his wallet, on which Blankenship’s middle initial was J., which Keller figured would help to distinguish him from all the other Holden Blankenships in the world.

According to Dot, who had a source for credit cards and driver’s licenses, the license would pass a security check, and the cards would be good for at least a couple of weeks. But sooner or later all the charges would bounce when nobody paid them, and that didn’t bother Keller as far as Hertz and Days Inn and American Airlines were concerned, but the last thing he wanted to do was screw a stamp dealer out of money that was rightfully his. He had a feeling that wouldn’t happen, that the credit card company would be the one to eat the loss, but even so he didn’t like the idea. His hobby was the one area of his life where he got to be completely clean and aboveboard. If he bought the stamps and avoided paying

for them, he was essentially stealing them, and it hardly mattered if he was stealing them from James McCue or Visa. He was perfectly comfortable with the notion of having official reprints on the first page of his Swedish issues, but not stolen reprints, or even stolen originals. If he couldn't come by them honestly, he'd just as soon get along without them.

Dot would have a snappy comeback for that one, he supposed, or at the very least roll her eyes. But he figured most collectors would get the point.

But did he have enough cash?

He didn't want to check in front of an audience, and asked to use the bathroom, which wasn't a bad idea anyway, after all the coffee he'd had with breakfast. He counted the bills in his wallet and found they came to just under eight hundred dollars, which would leave him with less than two after he bought the stamps.

And he really wanted them.

That was the trouble with stamp collecting. You never ran out of things to want. If he'd collected something else—rocks, say, or old Victrolas, or art—he'd run out of room sooner or later. His one-bedroom apartment was spacious enough by New York's severe standards, but it wouldn't take many paintings to fill the available wall space. With stamps, though, he had a set of ten large albums, occupying no more than five running feet of bookshelf space, and he could collect for the rest of his life and spend millions of dollars and never fill them.

Meanwhile, it wasn't as though he couldn't afford six hundred dollars for the Swedish reprints, not with the fee he was collecting for the job that had brought him to Des Moines. And McCue's price was certainly fair. He'd be getting them for a third of catalog, and would have cheerfully paid close to full catalog value for them.

And did it matter if he wound up short of cash? He'd be out

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of Des Moines in a day or two, three at the most, and aside from buying the occasional newspaper and the odd cup of coffee, what did he need cash for, anyway? Fifty bucks to cover a cab home from the airport? That was about it.

He shifted six hundred dollars from his wallet to his breast pocket and went back to have another look at the stamps. No question, these babies were going home with him. "Suppose I pay cash?" he said. "That get me any kind of a discount?"

"Don't see much cash anymore," McCue said, and grinned. One side of his mouth went up while the rest stayed frozen. "Tell you what, we can skip the sales tax, long as you promise not to tell the governor."

"My lips are sealed."

"And I'll throw in those Norway stamps you picked out, though I don't guess that'll save you much. They can't come to more than ten dollars, can they?"

"More like six or seven."

"Well, that'll buy you a hamburger, if you don't want fries with it. Call it an even six hundred and we're good."

Keller gave him the money. McCue was counting it while Keller made sure he had all of the stamps he'd bought, tucking them away in an inside jacket pocket, adding the pair of tongs to another, closing the stamp catalog, when abruptly McCue said, "Oh, holy hell! Hold everything."

Were the bills counterfeit? He froze, wondering what was the matter, but McCue was on his feet, walking over to the radio, turning up the volume. The music had stopped and an agitated announcer was interrupting with a news bulletin.

"Holy hell," McCue said again. "We're in for it now."