

The Last Act

The audience was wowed. They sat there, completely dumbfounded. The magician had just conjured a pigeon out of thin air. He was wearing a short sleeved shirt, so he didn't have it in his sleeve. He had simply taken a feather, had it thoroughly inspected by the audience, and given it a wave. He then let the window open and the bird had flown out.

"Please, please, quiet down, the show must go on and all that," the magician said. The audience began to clap.

"No, no, don't try, I can tell when you're faking it," he said, procuring more applause and laughter from the audience.

The show continued, and the magician made two cards switch places, made napkins float, produced red balls then made them vanish. He cut a piece of rope in half, then restored it, then did it again, then cut it in half again and tied the ends together and tied a few loops in the rope. He then cut the loops leaving the knots, and blew the knots off leaving the original rope. He had his assistant put in a box and did the classic routine of cutting a person in thirds. Next, a member of the audience was invited up to inspect a safe, and then the magician got in the safe. The safe was then suspended four feet in the air. Several members of the audience were invited to come watch the safe, to insure nothing touched or exited the safe. An assistant continued with card tricks and juggling, then five minutes later, the magician came out, opened the safe door, and revealed his daughter. The audience was amazed, it was a fantastic finale.

The next night, ten minutes before the show, the magician was getting a small vial of amber liquid ready. He added a drop of honey, and exactly two ounces of tonic. Lastly,

he added a teaspoon of a jet black powder that immediately dissolved in the mixture. He slipped the vial into his coat pocket and smiled. His hopes were high that night.

The magician walked slowly towards the stage, running through the plan in his head. *It will work*, he kept telling himself. *Stay calm, and it will work*. He met the manager in the corridor, and asked him who the guest of honor was that night, if there were any children, just as he normally would. He greeted the waiters, he said hello to the chefs, took a drink of whiskey to calm his nerves, all just as he normally did for the first show of the night.

The magician performed all the acts previous to the safe trick almost perfunctorily, anticipating the finale. Then he got into the safe. Immediately, he went down the trap door in the bottom of the safe and switched places with his daughter. He looked at his watch. Four minutes and fifty-four seconds. The magician scurried down the ladder and to his dressing room, where he put on a waiter's uniform and cap.

From his dressing room, the magician went to the kitchen, and got the glass of wine the manager ordered every night at this time. No one recognized him. As he went up the stairs to the manager's office, he took out the vial and poured the contents into the glass of wine that he had carefully measured out to be exactly six ounces. The mixture was perfect; it did not show up at all: it blended right in.

When he reached the manager's office, the magician could hear the typewriter inside. He knocked the customary three times. The manager answered, "Is that you Pasqual? I will be right there, just set it on the tray outside. You may go."

“Yes sir, absolutely sir,” said the magician in a very convincing accent, which, through the door, sounded exactly like the waiter who normally took the manager his drink.

He hurried away, checking his watch on the way. One minute and thirty-seven seconds. The magician went down the stairs, through the kitchen and into his dressing room. One minute, six seconds. He quickly got into his performers suit. Thirty-four seconds. He ran out the door, down the hallway. Twenty-five seconds. He jumped up the stairs two at a time and landed into the prop room. Fifteen seconds. He ran through the prop room, but had to pick up the box he bumped. Seven seconds. He dashed desperately for the back stage door, and into the side stage area. Three seconds. The magician took a deep, deep breath. He had made it.

The magician walked on stage to much amazement. He went over to the safe, still catching his breath. He bent over, unlocked the safe, and opened the door. His daughter was there smiling, and the audience was awestruck. The magician’s daughter walked out, shut the door, and together they took a bow. As the magician looked out from the stage, he had a rush of euphoria with the thought that he had fooled more than the audience. But then, as he looked at his daughter, he felt the sharp prick of reality. He may have just caused her more pain than the euphoria he had felt.

They will never suspect, the magician thought. He will never suspect, she will never suspect, and neither will the police. They will never even think of me or catching anyone! I am impervious to prosecution! I need not worry about my daughter discovering it was me. My alibi is rock solid.

Forty-seven hours and forty minutes later, the manager was in his office filling out an order form for steaks. The work was slow and tedious, so the manager decided to ring up the kitchen.

“Hello?” the manager said. “Yes, could you bring my drink up early tonight? A little backed up, huh? In a few minutes? Good, wait, what? Oh, yes I’m filling out the forms now. OK, thanks.” The manager sat back and sighed, pleased with himself and the feeling of power involved in his work.

The magician was on the stage doing a light conjuring trick when he saw Pasqual called out of the dining room. Suddenly, the magician realized that it would happen just after the waiter brought the manager his drink. The magician felt his stomach doing somersaults and his heart pounding five times as hard as normal. Pasqual would be blamed. It would not be a simple stroke. It would be treated as a murder.

Knowing the waiter’s love for vanishing and producing tricks, the magician called out, “Pasqual, what’s that hanging out of your collar?” The waiter turned around trying to see what was wrong. “Here,” said the magician in an endearing tone, “let me get that for you...” The magician slowly pulled a large, knotted and polka dotted handkerchief out of the waiter’s collar. “There you are, but why is it knotted?” The waiter shook his head. “You don’t know?! Well, we can’t very well leave it like this?! Here you take this end, and I’ll take this end. Now, on the count of three, the audience will yell, ‘zimm-balla-zimm,’ and I want you to pull as hard as you can, OK?” The waiter and the audience all agreed, so the magician looked at his watch, waited, then suddenly cried, “One, and Two, And THREE!”

On three, the knots flew off the handkerchief, and the manager felt like knots where being tied in his brain. He began to lose vision in his left eye, and his left arm went numb, causing his hand to scribble across the paper he was writing on. The manager had had a mild stroke before, and recognized what was happening. He called the front desk, but all they heard was an incomprehensible mumbling, which aroused immediate suspicion. The front desk secretary sent a waiter up to the manager's office. The manager was found quickly, and the ambulance was called.

By the time the ambulance showed up, the manager had passed out, and the magic show was a few minutes away from the finale. An EMT assured the audience, "Everything is fine; there was no need to panic, just continue with your show."

The magician was almost in a daze. *It had worked. It really worked*, he thought. *Even better than I thought. Now I have a die hard witness, Pasqual.*

As the magician went backstage he was startled when he heard. "Excuse me sir, Captain Sykes, I'm from homicide." A man in a weathered uniform under a topcoat had come up to him

"Homicide?" this worried the magician a little, but he stayed confident. "But the paramedics told me he died of stroke, you know, a heart problem or something."

"Yes, yes, I understand, but they called me out, and I've got to examine all the facts and evidence."

"I see.... If I can be of any assistance Captain, please, tell me," the magician said in a serious voice.

"Oh, absolutely, sir, sure thing." The captain started absent-mindedly talking to himself. "Let's see, the lab boys are just finishing up in there, then I'll go take a look..."

The homicide captain continued to mumble, then suddenly turned around and exclaimed, “Oh, yeah! I’m sorry sir, but I didn’t catch your name.”

The magician smiled. “De Leon, Captain. Louis de Leon.”

The Captain nodded, shook hands with de Leon, and then walked away. He went over to the EMTs and talked to them for a short while, then asked the secretary some questions. “Now, ma’am when you answered the phone, what exactly did you hear?” the Captain inquired.

“Well,” the secretary replied, “I saw it was from the manager’s office, so I answered immediately. I heard his voice, but lower, and mumbling something that I now realize was ‘stroke’ and ‘help.’”

“M-hm,” continued the Captain, “and then you sent the waiter.”

“Yes,” answered the secretary, beginning to cry.

“There, there, you did a good job, and you handled the situation perfectly,” said the Captain encouragingly. As he walked away, the forensics team came down the stairs.

“It’s all yours Captain,” said the team leader. Sykes nodded and went up the stairs. When he got to the office, he did not see anything that would suggest a struggle, no evidence whatsoever to suggest anyone but the manager had been in the room.

He started down the stairs, when he saw something in the crook between the thick carpet and the wall. It was a cork, not for a wine bottle that one could expect for a restaurant, but one the size for a test tube. The detective carefully picked it up in a napkin and kept walking down the stairs. When he came down he said good night to the waiters and the secretary, and continued to the door. Then he paused.

“Mr. de Leon, you don’t mind if I come over tomorrow, do ya? I have always been fascinated with magic.”

De Leon answered immediately, “Of course, Captain, by all means, I’ll be here around 3:00.” The Captain nodded and drove away in an old car.

The next day, promptly at 3:00, de Leon arrived at the Restaurant de Magick. There was the Captain’s old car, in the magician’s customary parking space. De Leon pulled in beside the car and proceeded into the building. As he walked through the door, a couple of forensics officers walked by him with a sample box. When he walked into the dining room, he almost ran out the door. Captain Sykes was standing in front of the stage, looking around with hawk-like eyes. De Leon had a surge of panic as he thought of how long the Captain could have been here looking around.

“Hello there Captain,” said de Leon.

“Oh!” said the Captain, surprised. “Mr. de Leon, how good to see you. I was in the area a little sooner than I thought so I just came in a few minutes early, I hope you don’t mind.”

The magician replied, nonchalant, “Not at all Captain. So what is it you’d like to see?”

“Well sir, I was hoping to see a magic trick, but I really should get some work done first. So, what was the situation here at the restaurant? Did Perez have any enemies?”

“Oh, well, some people didn’t like him, but I wouldn’t exactly that label on them,” said the magician. “When Jonathan bought the restaurant and came into the

manager's spot, there were a few people who were jealous, but nothing serious. But then he started cutting corners.

“Perez began with raising the price of the food, which overall didn't affect the employees too much, but then he started lowering wages, first with the least important workers, then up to me eventually. Then Perez started to order cheaper, lower quality ingredients, and took away some employee discounts and benefits.

“Now, you might be asking, why? Were there hard economic times? Where did the money go? No, there were no economic concerns; in fact, we had to start requiring reservations about a year ago because of our growing popularity. All that money Perez seemed to be saving, he really was saving. In his own bank account.”

“Aww, that's terrible! He didn't lower wages too much did he?” asked the Captain.

“Not bad enough for murder, but for the more recently hired waiters, it did hurt a bit. But they are all reasonably happy with their work, and they didn't feel all that cheated,” answered de Leon.

“I see,” said Sykes. “Well that's all the questions I had for you...”

“So are you game for a magic trick?” asked de Leon.

“Oh,” said Sykes, very happily, “that would be fantastic, sir.”

So the magician started. “Very well, you can see these handcuffs are completely legitimate, right?”

“Why don't we use my hand cuffs sir?!” said the captain jokingly. But de Leon told Sykes to put the handcuffs on him. Immediately he got out of them. Then, the

magician got out a deck of cards. He began shuffling the cards, preparing for a big trick when one of the kitchen staff came out and said, “Captain Sykes? The phone’s for you.”

“Thank you,” he replied, standing up. “I’ll be back in a flash sir, don’t worry...”

“Oh, yeah, of course, no problem...” said de Leon, somewhat put out.

A few minutes later, Sykes came in the door, much more serious than before he left. “I’m real sorry sir, I just got you going, and you were doing great, but I’ve got another case. Only, I have one more question sir. You look like a military man, and I was wondering, were you involved in World War II? Veterans always have the best stories...”

“Oh, no, it’s no problem,” said de Leon, and then he paused. “Yes, I was involved in World War II. I was with the 209th French Special Division, and yes, I have stories. But you have to go, I’m sorry for taking so much time.”

Sykes just nodded his head, shook hands with de Leon and said good-bye, then left. Immediately, de Leon went down to his dressing room to change. But first, he checked to see if Sykes and his forensics people had come down there. But every thing was in order. De Leon gave a sigh of relief.

The next day, de Leon came to the restaurant at three o’clock, and the same old car was in his spot. When de Leon walked inside, there was no sign of Sykes, so the magician walked to his dressing room wondering where he was.

The Captain was in the kitchen, talking the waiter Pasqual. The detective was standing with one foot on a chair, leaning onto his knee. He was asking about the two nights before the death of Jonathan Perez.

“So you mean that some one had gone ahead and taken up the drink before you got there, right?” asked the captain.

“That’s right sir,” replied the nervous waiter. “I came into the kitchen and they said the drink was all taken care of. I’m tellin’ the truth, all of it, honest.”

Sykes smiled, “I believe you. Thank you you’ve been very helpful. Now do you know where Mr. de Leon’s daughter is?”

“Yeah, I think she’s down in the prop room,” said Pasqual.

“Thank you again, you’ve been great. I’ll see ya later,” said Sykes encouragingly as he walked away.

When he got to the prop room, the captain had to look hard to find the magician’s daughter. Finally he found her on the other side of the room behind a large cabinet.

“Mrs. de Leon?” inquired the detective.

Startled, she looked up, “Oh, hello. And you are?”

“Sykes, Captain Sykes, SFPD. Homicide,” he said. “Do you mind if I ask you just a few questions?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “What can I help you with?”

Well, I was wondering, what was your relationship to Jonathan Perez?”

Immediately, her face saddened, and reluctantly she said, “Jonathan and I were married. He was dating me before he took over the restaurant. We quietly married about two weeks after he bought the place. Only a few people knew. We loved each other dearly and he always made sure I was happy.”

“Mmm-hm, and I just thought of this, but have you seen his will?” asked the detective.

“Yes, do you want me to get it for you?”

“No, that’s fine, just tell me about anything involving you,” said the captain.

“He obviously wanted me to be taken care of when he died, because he left the restaurant to me!” she exclaimed.

“Did you tell any one?” the detective asked, almost urgently.

“Yes, my father. But isn’t that something, Mr. Sykes? I get the restaurant,” she said.

“Yes,” said Sykes thoughtfully, “that is something. Thank you very much, you’ve been very helpful...” As he said this, he was looking off into space, deep in thought. He then began to walk away.

“Wait, is that all?” asked the magician’s daughter.

Sykes suddenly came out of his contemplative state and said, “You have been more help than you know.” With that, he winked and walked out the door.

Later that night, de Leon began to get ready for his show, he went out to get his props ready, he put on his make up and changed into his performer’s suit. He finished all of that, and the show started. De Leon did his routine then got in the safe.

When he got to his dressing room, the lights were off. *Didn’t I leave them on?* thought the magician. When he turned on the lights, he almost screamed. Sykes was there. He had two police officers with him.

“Louis de Leon,” said Sykes in a slow, sad, tired voice, “I’m here to arrest you for the murder of Jonathan Perez.”

De Leon paused. “On what grounds?” he asked.

“Sir,” Captain Sykes said, “I believe you poisoned Mr. Perez. With a very subtle and little known poison, so little known that we had to get a special chemist to come and identify it. This poison is a delayed toxic response poison, one that can be calculated by

dose to go off in a certain amount of time. I believe that you used this time, between getting in the safe to getting back on stage to deliver the dose in the drink Mr. Perez ordered every night. You set the time so that the poison would go off while you were on stage, to give you a rock solid alibi.”

“And your evidence,” asked de Leon, almost impassively.

“The waiter who usually brought Mr. Perez his drink reported not delivering the drink two days before the victim’s death. The 209th French Special Division was in charge of the deployment and the safe and secure storage of poison gases. If you were an officer, you would know all of the poisons and their various effects. This knowledge would enable you to derive the poison, mix it and calculate the dose necessary.

“Further, this cork was found on the stairs on the way to the manager’s office. It had traces of the poison on it. We found a jar of the powder form of the poison mixed in with your make up. This vial, found in a waiter’s uniform in this dressing room, also contains traces of the poison. Your prints are on the vial.” Captain Sykes seemed finished.

“And my motive?” asked de Leon in that same reserved tone.

“You told me part of it. Your wages were cut. But your daughter is married to Perez, correct?” de Leon nodded. “And Perez’s will states that the restaurant goes to your daughter?” Again, he nodded. “So in order for things to be run your way at the restaurant, you killed Jonathan Perez.”

The Magician kept his head held high. “When did you know?”

Captain Eric Sykes replied with that same sad, tired tone, “When you lied about talking to the EMTs. You said they said it was a stroke. But the EMTs had not disclosed any information to anyone until later, until after our first conversation.”

“If you will come with me, sir,” said the officer on Sykes right.