



# ***The Hero of Paris Valley***

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*Year 1919*

*“Over the rolling hills into the morning mist a farmer drove his horse and wagon on the one and only dirt road leading out of the small town of Paris Valley. He moved to his right to allow a new horseless carriage to pass. Inside the carriage were a well dressed man and woman too busy in conversation to acknowledge him.”*

On Main Street: The faint sound of Dixieland music could be heard coming from the park. Political banners hung high over the crowd of people gathered to hear the candidates speak on that fine Saturday morning. On each side of the gazebo a podium was set up for the speakers. One was for the town's banker, Mr. Jonathan Gracey. The other was for the town's undertaker, Mr. Willard McCobb.

Phillip, a tall young blond sporting an unruly beard, reclined lazily against the base of a nearby tree. His clothes were worn and a bit too small. He wore a funny old straw hat with a stiff brim. Sitting next to him was his trusted friend and buddy, Gravitts.

The band began to play louder and the crowd started clapping.

Gravitts, a friendly, but shabby looking possum, perked up and quickly climbed up the side of the tree to have a better view.

"Been a long time since we've had any music 'round this burg," he said.

"True, not much happens around here, that's for sure," Phillip replied.

The music began to fade and the crowd quieted.

"Hey, Mayor Headly is gonna say sometin'," Gravitts said.

"Big deal, who wants to listen to that old wind-bag?"

Gravitts looked at Phillip a little bewildered. "Well, if'n my pa was running for mayor I'd want to hear what the former mayor had to say about it." Gravitts moved higher up the tree and supported himself on a limb.

Phillip, somewhat turned off with the event, leaned against the tree to brace himself and as he got to his feet the back of his stiff brimmed hat came in contact with the tree, pushing it up in front, exposing a large green frog.

"Ribbit! Ribbit! Ribbit!"

Phillip tilted his head forward to drop his hat back into place. The frog disappeared. It was only after standing that Phillip's stature was noticeable. His

uncombed hair and straggly beard didn't hide his obvious good looks. He was truly a giant among the other young men around town and had no trouble seeing over the heads in the crowd.

Cameras were focused at the foot of the gazebo where two Keystone Kops were escorting the former Mayor Tom Headly to the podium. They stepped back as Headly began to speak to the crowd that had gathered to hear the new mayoral candidates debate each other.

“Good morning, fellow citizens of Paris Valley. I wanted to say that I'm very proud to have had the opportunity to serve as your mayor for the last eight years.”

The crowd applauded loudly.

“Thank you very much! However, all things must come to an end and although I will miss serving as your mayor, it's well beyond the time for me to retire.” Choking up, he paused to gain his composure. “The good news is you have before you today two gentlemen from whom to select to carry Paris Valley on into the 1920's.”

The crowd applauded again.

“Now, I'm not going to give some overdone speech showing my political support for one candidate over the other. Instead, I want to provide my nonpartisan support for both of these prominent businessmen. First, I'd like to introduce the candidate to my right, Mr. Willard McCobb, our town's undertaker.”

Mr. McCobb was dressed in his traditional blue velvet and satin coat and black top hat. He was a tall lean spindly man. His pale skin, high cheekbones and dark deep set eyes made him almost terrifying to look at. His smile was rather demonic as well, but he seemed to muster up a grin showing off his dingy imperfect teeth in response to Tom Headly's introduction. He removed his hat and bowed repeatedly to the crowd.

There was a smattering of applause as the crowd watched two rat characters milling around in front of the platform blowing whistles and holding up “applause” signs.

Bumbles and Phincher were very well known in Paris Valley as Mr. McCobb's henchmen and as small time hoodlums. Bumbles continued to blow his whistle and rally the crowd to clap more and louder long after Mr. McCobb finished his overdone bows and sat down. Bumbles became rattled when he saw Phincher staring at him and realized he was the only one jumping around and making noises.

Mayor Tom Headly stepped back to the podium and cleared his throat.

Silence.

"And to my left," he smiled and gestured, "is Jonathan Gracey. We all know Mr. Gracey, our town banker."

Jonathan Gracey was a portly, balding, distinguished gentleman, dressed in a business suit and sporting a colorful bow tie. Most everyone in Paris Valley had come to know him, and respected him. He stood and waved to the crowd.

The crowd applauded loudly and continued long after he sat down.

"Gravitts, this is boring stuff," Phillip said, as he returned to his seat at the foot of the tree and leaned his head against the trunk. Again the brim of his hat rose briefly exposing his pet frog.

"Ribbit! Ribbit! Ribbit!"

Phillip leaned forward, dropping his hat back into position.

Just then, a beautiful young well-dressed woman with reddish-brown hair showing from under her lovely hat approached the gazebo. Mayor Headly looked down at her, smiled, and gestured for her to join him on the platform. As Magdalena stepped up on the platform, the crowd grew quiet. Few people knew who she was and were taken aback by her striking beauty.

"At this time I have the pleasure of introducing the beautiful Town Clerk of Paris Valley, Miss Magdalena Stafferd."

Gravitts hoisted himself higher in the tree "Phillip, me tinks you should see this."

“Gravitts, I told you I’m just not interested in politics. Besides, I’ve been listening to that speech my dad is about to give all week. I probably know it better than he does.”

“But wow, Phillip, you really need to see this.”

Phillip reluctantly stood up. Looking over the crowd and for the first time he saw the beautiful Magdalena. He smiled, his eyes lit up with excitement.

“Gravitts, you’re not often right, but this time ‘Wow’ is right! I don’t remember seeing her around here,” he said, not taking his eyes off the beautiful girl.

“Well, maybe you should pay more attention, Phillip. That’s Miss Magdalena, the Town Clerk of Paris Valley.”

“Maybe I should,” he replied.

Leaving Gravitts in the tree, Phillip slowly made his way to the front of the crowd. He stood next to the gazebo where Magdalena was about to speak. Magdalena looked over at Headly and smiled. Headly continued.

“Magdalena is my right hand man, er, uh woman, he corrected himself. Over the years she has been a valuable asset to me. She will be overseeing this election and I hope she will stay on as Town Clerk for the new mayor, whoever that may be,” he added.

There was a strong applause of approval. Headly braced himself with his cane, stepped back, and sat down in the chair behind him. Magdalena stood, smiled shyly, and waited until the crowd quieted.

“Thank you, friends of Paris Valley” she said, “I’d like to begin the debate by letting the two candidates speak for themselves. First, we’ll hear from Johnathan Gracey, and then Willard McCobb. Mr. Gracey,” she said looking to her left. Mr. Gracey stood and walked to the podium.

Phillip looked up at his father and sarcastically mouthed the first few words of his speech. “*My fellow citizens of Paris Valley.*” Phillip looked over at Magdalena, and forgetting about his pet frog, tipped his hat, smiled and spoke to her. “Hello, uh, uh, hello,” he said stuttering.

Magdalena looked down at Phillip and gave him a quick once over, frowned and turned her attention back to Mr. Gracey giving his speech.

Phillip cleared his throat and boastfully said so Magdalena could hear, “That’s my father up there.”

Magdalena glanced back at Phillip and thought to herself, “That’s strange, I fail to see the resemblance, such an unkempt young man.”

Phillip saw her annoyed look. His smile dropped as he became aware of his appearance and attempted to brush the dust from his coat. The people around him coughed and moved away. He motioned to Gravitts who had worked his way to the front of the crowd, “Come on Gravitts, we have better things to do.”

Gravitts followed Phillip through the crowd and to the edge of the park before he asked, “Where are we headed?”

“Let’s go out to the swimming hole.”

They headed down the dusty dirt road out of town. Brush and weeds grew tall on each side of the road and rabbits hopped across their paths startling them. Phillip walked in silence kicking rocks in front of him while thinking about the beautiful Magdalena. Gravitts, in one of his happy-go-lucky moods, ran ahead, then suddenly stopped, and waited for Phillip to catch up.

“What a babe, huh?” he asked.

“I don’t think she would appreciate you referring to her in that way.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. So, what did you think of her?”

“*WHAT A BABE!* No, seriously, I think she’s beautiful, but obviously she doesn’t think much of me.”

“What do you mean?”

Phillip laughed. “Never mind, let’s go swimming.”

“Swimmin’! Yahoo! Race you!”

Gravitts scurried down the road, hanging onto his hat. Phillip walked a few steps behind. When they reached the swimming hole, they yanked their clothes off and dove into the cool water. For the next few hours they swam and played, thinking of nothing more than having a good time.

Finally tired and water logged, they crawled out of the water hole and sunned themselves lazily on the grassy shore. Gravitts noticed Phillip had a long piece of grass in his mouth. Wanting to be like his friend, he picked a piece of grass and started chewing on it.

Phillip's pet frog was sitting on a large flat rock near the water ribbitting loudly and enjoying its freedom. Phillip picked up his hat and sailed it through the air landing it on top of the frog, silencing it. Phillip and Gravitts rolled over laughing.

"That Magdalena is a very soo-phistick-krated lady."

Phillip corrected Gravitts, "You mean sophisticated."

"Yeah, yeah, that's what I mean."

"I think she's too much for my taste."

"What do you mean?" Gravitts asked.

"Well, she's, uh, a bit out of my class."

"You mean she's from another school?"

"No, no, when I say class I don't mean school. I mean, she's classier than I am."

"So you mean she has better clothes than you?"

"Of course not! What I mean is, she's more refined than I am, more cultured, probably comes from some rich family, you know the kind?"

"Oh. She's a hobby snobby, a high fa-looter, a better-n-you, a-"

"Okay, okay, that's enough."

“Sorry. But aren’t you from a rich family? You’re no snooty-tooter.”

“Well, I’m different. I want to be who I am, not what everyone else wants me to be.”

“You kinda like her, don’t you?”

Phillip smiled and nodded.

“So why didn’t you tell her right off?”

Phillip pushed his long blond hair off his forehead, “Well, that’s just not how it’s done, because I just met her, that’s why.”

“That’s how we do it!”

“You mean when opportunity knocks you have to answer the door? Well, that’s not how it’s done in personal matters between a boy and a girl. These things take time. And besides, I can already tell she doesn’t like me the way I am”

“Well, if you like her, then you can change, can’t you?”

“Now you’re starting to sound like my parents.

“What’s that “posed to mean?”

“I don’t want to be like everyone else, I want to be me.” Phillip replied.

Phillip turned his back to Gravitts and laid silently in the sun daydreaming about Magdalena...

“What’s the point of this silly rat race anyway?” Phillip said as he got to his feet. He saw Gravitts was sound asleep and nudged him with his foot. “Gravitts, Gravitts, stop playing possum and get dressed. We gotta go.”

Phillip and Gravitts dressed and started walking back to town.

Gravitts, still half asleep and worn out from swimming and lying in the sun, struggled along behind. When they reached Phillip's house, Phillip waved back to Gravitts.

"See you later."

Phillip, entered through the kitchen door, spotted the apple pie his mother had just baked sitting on the cabinet cooling. He leaned down and breathed in the wonderful aroma. Mmm.

"Phillip! Is that you?"

"Yeah, Mom, it's me all right."

"Leave that pie alone," she called. "Come on in here and say hello to your father and Mr. Parrot."

Phillip went into the living room where his father was sitting in his wing back chair talking to a well-dressed parrot.

"Hello, Son, come over here. I want you to meet an old friend of mine and my campaign manager, Garret the Parrot. Garret, this is my boy, Phillip."

"Hello, Mr. Parrot."

"Please, please, just call me Garret."

Garret wore a flashy tie and expensive business suit and spoke with a clear English accent. Phillip immediately felt uncomfortable and turned to walk away.

"Dad, I'm going to my room."

"Did you hear my speech today?" his father called out.

Phillip shouted back, "I've heard it all week, Dad, remember?"

"I really don't know what to do with that boy," Phillip's father told Garret. "His mother and I can't seem to get him interested in anything productive."

“He’s a growing boy Jon, give him time.” Garrett said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Time? That’s all he has! His mother and I think it’s time he cleaned himself up and got a decent job.”

Jonathan calmed himself, “You know, Garret, you’re going to make a great campaign manager. I just know it. Too bad you can’t work some of your magic on our son. I’d like to see him in a nice suit from your clothing store, get a haircut and shave off that pitiful excuse for a beard.”

Garret tapped his beak, thinking, “Well, it would be a bit of a challenge. It’s true, but I could do it if-”

“Yes, yes, if-? I’m listening.”

“Well, he has to want to change before I can do anything. No offense, of course, but Phillip has to be motivated enough to approach me first.”

“Do you really think you can help him improve himself? Assuming, of course, it’s his decision.”

“Without a doubt. Why, Jon, did you forget who I am and my reputation? I’m Garret the Parrot! Remember?”

“Yes of course, forgive me, Garret.”

Jonathan and Garret reached for their drinks on the table to make a toast.

“That, my friend, is why I’ve asked you to manage my campaign.” Jonathan raised his eyebrows and watched Garret’s expression. “So, I take it you’ll accept the position?”

“Certainly, I wouldn’t have it any other way. In fact, it has a rather nice ring to it.” Garret smiled and raised his hands as if revealing a beautiful landscape.

“*GARRET THE PARROT, CAMPAIGN MANAGER!* Hummmm, I like the sound of that. I better get going and get the posters printed so we can get them out tomorrow.”

Jonathan shook hands and walked Garret to the door.

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Two days later: Jonathan and Garret met with a group of neighbor children they'd hired to nail up campaign posters advertising Gracey's candidacy. The children anxiously waited with their pockets full of nails and hammers hooked in the loops of their overalls. Seeing the cart full of posters, they pushed their way to the front to get their share.

"All right everyone, simmer down. You'll all get your posters. Here, you take these and here's some for you. Listen to me, please! Remember where you put these up." Jonathan stopped handing out posters to get the children's attention, "Now why is that?" he asked.

The children shouted, "Because we get another penny for each one we bring back after the election!"

"What else?" Jonathan asked.

Again the children shouted, "Because we don't want to litter!"

"That's right! And remember don't be nailing them on houses and private property. Now run on, get the job done before nightfall!"

Jonathan smiled as he watched the children run in different directions with his posters tucked under their arms. He became teary-eyed at their willingness to work at such a young age.

"Don't worry, Jon, I'll walk around town to make sure the posters end up in the right places."

"I think that would be a great idea. Thanks, Garret."

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In that alley across the street, Willard McCobb and his cohorts, Bumbles and Phincher, were watching Mr. Gracey and Garret the Parrot hand out posters.

"Right on schedule," McCobb said. "Now you two know what to do."

“Right boss, we put your posters up, then we *RIP ‘EM DOWN!*”

McCobb removed his hat and rolled his eyes. “You’re not listening!”

Phincher, the smarter of the two, was leaning against the building cleaning his cruddy nails. He realized Bumbles was really blowing it. Acting like a tough guy, he quickly stepped forward, stepping on Bumbles’ toes. “Put a sock in it and listen up, Chubby!” he said.

“It’s simple, boss,” Phincher said, “us guys, we seek out Gracey’s posters and we take them down and replace them with yours. Then we take his posters for a little ride in the country and bury them in a place where no one snoopin’ ‘round will find ‘em.”

McCobb hung onto every word Phincher was saying to ensure the accuracy of his instructions.

“Okay. Now what happens if you get caught?” McCobb asked.

“We ‘splain that we noticed some of Gracey’s posters had fallen down and we, as a courtesy, were puttin’ ‘em back up.”

“Don’t worry boss, we know what to do. I’ll be in charge so nothin’ goes wrong.” Phincher added.

“Okay, good. One more thing, what are you going to do when you see prospective voters on the street?”

“We’ll tell ‘em to vote for you and ‘mind’ ‘em of all the great things you’re gonna do for Paris Valley.”

Willard McCobb smiled and leaned over to look them in the eyes. “That’s correct Phincher. If I get elected we’ll be rich. Don’t forget that! Understood?”

Phincher and Bumbles were hunched over, trembling at the sound of McCobb’s creepy voice.

“Now off with you two! And make me proud of you for a change,” he added. McCobb stood tall, crossed his arms. He couldn’t stop smiling at the thought of becoming rich.

Bumbles and Phincher hurried down the street pulling their cart full of McCobb's posters. They stopped and watched as two young boys finished nailing up one of Gracey's posters. Once the boys were out of sight, Bumbles hoisted Phincher up the tree with one of McCobb's posters. Phincher tore down Gracey's poster and nailed one of McCobb's in its place. They put the torn poster in their cart under the stack of McCobb's posters, then, continued through town, removing Gracey's posters and replacing them with McCobb's. At the end of the day, just as Bumbles was pulling the tarp over the wagon of posters, a Keystone Kop suddenly appeared from around the corner and addressed them in his Irish brogue.

“Well, well, if it isn't me ol' two best crooks, Bumbles and Phincher.”

Officer Kruspy tapped Bumbles lightly on the shoulder with his night stick. “Now, tell me young fella' what kind of trouble are ya' gettin' ya'selves in toda'?”

“Oh nothin', Occerfer Kruppee,” Bumbles replied.

“Kruspy! Kruspy! Officer Kruspy! Can ya' say that?”

“Yes sir, that's what I said sir, Kruspy,” Bumbles repeated.

Before Bumbles could say anything more, Phincher stepped between them. “Officer Kruspy, so nice to see you again. Why, Bumbles and me are now gainfully employed. We have given up our ol' ways. No more crime for us two. We have changed our ways, seen the light, learned out lessons, why, have-“

Officer Kruspy interrupted, “Oka', oka', I've heard enough. I'm wise to ya'. Just tell me what's under the tarp?”

“Good that you asked, Officer.” Phincher placed his hand on the tarp, “This here is the source of our new found fortune, the golden egg, the sacka cash, the-“

Officer Kruspy tapped the handle of the wagon with his stick. “Go on, show me what ya' have under there.”

Phincher reached under the tarp and felt around until he found a crisp McCobb poster. He pulled it out and handed it to the officer.

“What's this?” Kruspy asked.

“What’s this? Why, that’s a campaign poster for the next mayor. The honorable Willard McCobb! And us two guys are his campaign managers!”

Officer Kruspy laughed. “McCobb will never be the next mayor and if he hired ya’ two, he’s even dumber than I thought.”

“Officer, we’re deeply saddened by your comments and lack of confidence in us guys.”

“Only time will tell. If you decide to walk the straight and narrow, I’m behind ya’ all the way. But if ya’ backslide, I’ll be there to put the cuffs on. That ya’ can be sure of. Now get out of my way.” Officer Kruspy watched Phincher and Bumbles pull their wagon down the street toward the funeral home. He rubbed his chin in thought. “Somehow I just don’t think those two can be trusted.”

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Phillip sat at the kitchen table waiting for his breakfast. In the next room he could hear his father and Garret talking. His mother sat a large stack of hotcakes topped with strawberries and cream in front of him. “Mmm, thanks mom, my favorite breakfast.”

“I know, son,” she said giving him a kiss of affection on the cheek.

Phillip ate ravenously, while listening to his father and Garrets conversation.

”Tell me, what plans do you have today?”

Phillip didn’t hear his mother. His mind was elsewhere.

*“PHILLIP!”*

“I’m sorry, Mom. I wasn’t paying attention. I was listening to Dad and Garret in the other room.”

“I can see that. How come all of the sudden you’re interest in your father’s politics?”

“I’m not interested in politics, I’m interested in Magdalena.”

“Magdalena?”

“Yes, Magdalena, the Town Clerk. I overheard Garret mention her name.”

“Your father wants Garret to go to the Town Hall and officially register as his campaign manger, now that he’s accepted the job.”

“Is that something he needs to do himself, or can I do it for him?” Phillip asked.

“Why don’t you go ask them yourself?”

“Good idea!” Phillip quickly finished his pancakes and removed his plate from the table. He went into the living room where his father and Garret were discussing strategy. He smiled as he interrupted the two. “Good morning.”

“What can we do for you, Son? We’re a little busy right now,” his father said.

“I know, Dad, but I couldn’t help but overhear that Garret was going to have to go to the Town Hall to register as your campaign manager. Is that right?”

“That’s right. Why do you ask?”

“Maybe I could help by doing it for him.”

Mr. Gracey looked at his son suspiciously. “And why would you want to do that? You said you weren’t interested in politics.”

“Well, I’m not. But I thought I could save him a trip, that’s all.”

Garret spoke up. “I think that’s a smashing idea and it would certainly save me some time.”

“I guess I can’t see any harm in it and it would be helpful, Son.”

“I’m only trying to help, Dad.”

Garret handed Phillip some papers. “All you need to do is find Miss Magdalena and give her this paperwork.”

“That’s it?” Phillip asked as he took the papers from Garret.

“That’s it.”

“Boy, this politics stuff is easy,” Phillip said.

“There’s a lot more involved than delivering paperwork, I can assure you of that, Son.”

“We appreciate your help, Phillip, and there’s plenty more to do if you’re interested in helping us out,” Garret said.

“Maybe, I’ll see. I’m kinda busy these days,” Phillip replied.

Mr. Gracey thinking aloud, asked. “Doing what?”

“Stuff,” Phillip answered.

“Stuff, what stuff?” Gracey pried.

Without answering, Phillip left the room.

Mr. Gracey turned to Garret. “Did you hear that? I’d like to know when he’s going to grow up and take some responsibility.”

“He will, Jon. Have patience. He’s already running an errand for us. That’s a start.”

Phillip quickly made his way toward town. As he passed through the neighborhood he tipped his hat offering friendly greetings and showing off his pet frog. He took the shortcut through the park over to the Town Hall. He stopped by the door to read the directory in order to locate the clerk’s office. On the first floor down the hall he paused in front of room 106 to catch his breath before making his entrance.

Magdalena was behind the counter working with one of her assistants. When Phillip got her attention he smiled and tipped his hat.

“Ribbit! Ribbit! Ribbit!”

Embarrassed at having completely forgotten about his frog, Phillip quickly replaced his hat. “Hi, Miss Stafferd.”

“Yes, I am Magdalena Stafferd. Can I help you?”

“I’m Phillip Gracey.”

“How can I help you, Mr. Gracey?”

“I’m Jonathans Gracey’s son, Phillip.”

She eyed him more closely. “Oh yes, I remember you now. What can I do for you?”

“I’m here to file the necessary paperwork for my father’s new campaign manager, Garret the Parrot.”

“All right, I can help you with that.” Magdalena held out her hand to take the papers. Phillip got caught up in the moment and took her hand in his. Magdalena pulled her hand back. She was not pleased with his advances. Phillip was suddenly aware of what he had unconsciously done and was even more uncomfortable.

“I assume the necessary papers are properly filled out?”

“Oh yes, uh, Mr. Garret filled them out himself.”

She quickly glanced over the papers. “It appears everything’s in order. I’ll file them before the end of the business day.”

Phillip stood in daze, not able to take his eyes from Magdalena’s face.

“Will that be all, Mr. Gracey?”

“Oh, uh-huh, I mean, yes.” Phillip answered nervously as he began to back away. He hadn’t noticed standing behind him was a very short stout man with a large red round nose. He reached for the man’s nose and gave it a twist, mistaking it for a doorknob.

“Oww! Hey, watch it,” the man snapped.

Phillip was mortified. “Oh, I beg your pardon, sir,” he said. Without turning back, he rushed out of the office.

One of the office staff recognized the gentleman waiting and went to assist him. As she passed Magdalena’s desk, she leaned over and whispered loud enough for the girls in the office to hear, “That young man has a crush on you.”

The gentleman overheard the assistant. “Well, he certainly had a crush on my nose!”

The girls giggled.

Magdalena looked up from her desk. “He doesn’t have a crush on me. I don’t even know him.”

“Looks like he’s in love, missy!” they teased.

“Well, maybe, but not with me.”

“He’s in love, and you know it!” her assistant Lulu Filbert said teasingly.

Phillip walked down the steps of the Town Hall building, paused, removed his hat, and scratched his head in disbelief at what a klutz he had been. His frog let out a croak and hopped to his shoulder. “Not another word from you!” he snapped, irritated with himself. He replaced his hat and put his frog in his pocket and continues through the park toward home.

“Phillip! Phillip!” Gravitts called out.

Phillip turned to see that Gravitts had been lying under the shade tree. “Oh hi, Gravitts.”

Gravitts stepped up beside Phillip. “You don’t look too happy. Everything okay?”

“Boy, am I embarrassed, I feel like a donkey!”

“Funny, you don’t look like a donkey.”

Gravitts realized Phillip was upset and tried to cheer him up. “How silly of me, of course you don’t look like a donkey. What I meant was-”

“Yeah, I know what you meant.”

“So, what’s up? Why all the fuss?” Gravitts asked.

“I was just over at the Town Hall dropping off some papers for my father’s campaign and, well, I really made a fool of myself, that’s what’s up.”

“You fooled yourself dropping off papers?”

“No, no, it wasn’t just the papers, it was-”

“Wait a minute, hold the phone, stop the press. Does this have anything to do with that girl?”

“You mean Magdalena? Yeah, I think she’s beautiful! She’s wonderful!” Phillip added, his mood changing and his eyes lighting up at the thought.

“Me tink I’m beginning to see what’s happenin’.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, I’ve heard of this happenin’ before.”

“You’ve heard of what happening before?”

“I hate to be the one to tell you, but me tink you’re fallin in-”

“Yes, yes, go on. In what?”

“*LOVE!* Yes, Phillip my friend, you’re takin’ a long walk off the short pier of emotional involvement, *LOVE, LOVE, LOVE!* Gravitts shouted twirling in circles.

“Yes, I think that’s it! I’m falling in love! Wow! I’m in love with Miss Magdalena!”

“Okay, get a grip on yourself.”

“You’re right. She doesn’t even know I exist.”

“Hey, cheer up old pal. All’s not lost. What you need is a quick makeover. You’re just lacking that stuff you said she had.”

“And what was that?”

“So-fista, ehh, so-fista...”

“Sophistication.”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Any bright ideas how I can get sophisticated in a big hurry?”

“How should I know? I’m not sy-bil-ized. What you need to do is talk to Garret the Parrot. He’d know.”

“No! Absolutely not! I’m not going to bother Garret. Besides, he’s too busy helping my father get elected.”

“How would you know he’s too busy unless you ask him?”

“He’s my dad’s friend. Why should he help me?”

Gravitts pointed across the street. “Well, that’s his clothing shop right over there. What say we go over there right now and see what he says and since he’s your father’s friend, he might be more than willing to give you some advice.”

“I suppose. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. That’s what they say, right?”

Gravitts laughed and slapped his friend on the back. “Good. Now tell me all about this Magdalena.”

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Phincher and Bumbles pulled and pushed the overloaded wagon toward the funeral home.

“Hey, Phincher.”

“What now?”

“I thought we was gonna bury Gracey’s posters someplace outta town.”

“We are, but I want the boss to see ‘em first, so he knows we did things right.”

“What if I help you get the wagon back to the boss’s place and I wait outside while you go in?”

“Are you tellin’ me you’re still afraid to go in the boss’s funeral home?”

“I don’t like it in there. It gives me the creepies.”

“Look, didn’t I get you this job?”

“Yeah.”

“Then reee-laxx. Dead peoples don’t hurt you. It’s the live peoples that you has to be afraid of, right?”

Bumbles gave a nod, “ Yeah, I guess so.”

“That’s the spirits,” Phincher said, as they arrived in front of the funeral home. “Now open the door.”

“There you go again with that spirit stuff!”

“Would you stop trying to frighten me and open the door?”

“Oh for crying out loud, get outta the way. Help push the wagon and I’ll open the door. You’re startin’ to scare me, you big sissy. Now push!”

Phincher and Bumbles pushed the heavy wagon through the door and down the long hallway. The walls were covered with red velvet wallpaper, lit up by small candles flickering shadows on the walls. It lacked the kind of illumination Bumbles was hoping for. Phincher stopped to rest. Bumbles wasn’t paying attention and pushed the wagon over Phincher’s toes.

Phincher let out a pitiful moan. “Watch what you’re doing, you rat face!”

“Bumbles! Phincher! Is that you?”

“Yeah, boss, where are you?”

“I’m in the coffin room.”

“Coffin room? Just great,” Bumbles mumbled.

“Would you pipe down and push?”

They pushed the wagon in front of the double doors to the coffin room. Phincher opened the two huge doors just wide enough to get the wagon through. Inside the light was even dimmer than in the hallway. Bumbles looked at the wooden coffins displayed along the walls. As he passed he was sure eyes were watching him. McCobb appeared from the back room. In the darkness, Pincher and Bumbles could only see his ghostly white face and hands.

“So, tell me the good news. How did everything go?”

“Uh, well, uh, I guess things went as well as ‘spected,” Phincher replied.

McCobb’s smile dropped, “I’m not sure that’s the kind of report I want to hear, Phincher. I was counting on you two to get the job done right!”

Phincher smiled in an attempt to gain his boss’s confidence. “Ha, ha, we did just like you said, boss. We tore down Gracey’s posters and replaced them with yours.”

“And we didn’t even get caught by Occerfer Kruppee,” Bumbles added.

“*OFFICER KRUSPY!* Phinnnncheerrrr!?”

Phincher laughed, “Ahh, it was nuttin’ Boss. Officer Kruspy is a big dummy. Ha, ha, we really put one over on him. He doesn’t have the slightest idea what’s up, boss. Yeah, that’s for sure!”

Bumbles looked over at Phincher and smiled. “Yeah, Boss, he’s not as smart as Phincher and me.”

Phincher tried to cover his nervousness. “So, anyway, that Gracey don’t stand a chance.”

McCobb raised his eyebrows. “HMMMM, for your sake, I hope what you say is true.”

“Piece ‘a cake, Boss”

“Tell me, did you talk everyone you met into voting for me?”

“Well, sir, we tried, we really tried, but no one wanted to listen to us, Boss.”

“You *TRIED*? I gave explicit instructions to do it, not to try. Don’t you get it? If I don’t win this election, I will lose everything. We’ll lose everything,” McCobb corrected himself. “Now, do you get the drift? *NO!* I don’t think you do. In order to succeed, you must be *EVIL!* We need to call upon the dark forces to help us sway the voters over to my side.”

McCobb slammed his large fist on top of the nearest coffin, crushing the lid into splinters. He then shook his long boney fingers in Phincher’s and Bumbles’ faces. “You tried! You tried! It’s obvious to me that you didn’t try hard enough!”

McCobb saw that Phincher and Bumbles were scared and trembling. He realized he must do something fast to calm them before he frightened them away. He still needed their help to get him elected and to pull off the secret deal he was planning. He forced a smile and patted each of them on the shoulder. “Boys, boys,” he said in a soft, syrupy voice. “Listen to me. Try to pay close attention to what I am about to say and it will serve you well. Now repeat after me.” His voice rose to a frightening pitch. “*WE NEED TO BE MORE EVIL!*”

Phincher and Bumbles repeated, “*WE NEED TO BE MORE EVIL! WE NEED TO BE MORE EVIL! WE NEED TO BE-*”

“That’s right, my little ones. Keep repeating it, again and again!”

Over and over Bumbles and Phincher repeated, “*NEED TO BE MORE EVIL! WE NEED TO BE MORE EVIL!*” each time getting louder and more excited.

Seeing that they had their confidence back, McCobb smiled. There’s them, and then there’s me,” he thought to himself gleefully.

Phincher and Bumbles noticed how excited their boss had become and they were getting more animated and started shouting, “*EVIL! EVIL! EVIL!*”

“Yes, that’s right, boys, *WE ARE EVIL!*”

They nodded their little heads as fast as they could, “Yes, yes, Master!”

“Good! Now come closer and I’ll tell you the plan that will make us rich!”

Phincher and Bumbles were already close, but they inched themselves a little closer until they felt the heat of McCobb’s breath on their faces.

McCobb smiled and put his long-fingered hands reassuringly on their shoulders. “Tell me, what does Paris Valley have lots of that Penner City needs most?”

Bumbles contorted his face, counting his fingers trying to think.

McCobb squinted his dark beady eyes. “*W-A-T-E-R!*” he spelled out. “*WATER!* Paris Valley has valuable water. Water that Penner City needs desperately if they want to grow and prosper. Water means growth and growth means money, and they’re willing to pay a big price for that water! Once I’m elected Mayor of Paris Valley, I’ll make that happen!”

“But what about the peoples in Paris Valley? Don’t they need the water for farming and stuff?” Bumbles wondered aloud.

McCobb leaned against the wall, pulled out his nail file and began filing his long nails. “They’ll have water, but they’ll just have to learn to live with less, that’s all.”

“How does selling water to Penner City make us guys rich, Boss?” Pincher asked.

McCobb patted Phincher on the head and spoke in a whisper, “Phincher, Phincher, Phincher,” he repeated as he took him by the ear and twisted it until he winced. Phincher tried to pull away, McCobb didn’t let go.

“You’re not listening! Why do I waste my time with you two numbskulls?” McCobb fumed. “I’ve already made arrangements with Pico De’Maage who works for Mayor Willie Bruin in Penner city. Mayor Bruin has agreed to make, shall I say, some ‘bonus payments’ directly to me, uh, I mean, us. Those ‘bonus payments’ will come directly to us in the form of cold hard cash. So, here’s what I need you two to do. And I mean *NO MISTAKES THIS TIME!*”

McCobb reached for a black bag inside the coffin to his right and held it in front of him. “I want you to get inside the ballot box at Town Hall. You’ll have to be very careful, very sly, you understand? Miss Magdalena is in charge of that box and keeps an eagle eye on it. So you’ll have to distract her to break into the box. Pincher, you’ll have to pick the lock because she wears the key around her neck and won’t give it to anyone. You must remove all the ballots and replace them with these.” McCobb handed the bag to Pincher.

Pincher took the bag and hurriedly tucked it under his coat, “You can count on us guys, Boss!”

McCobb raised his dark bushy eyebrow. “Don’t let her see you make the exchange. If she should ask you what you’re doing there, tell her you’ve come to cast your votes. Remember, everything we’re trying to do rests on your shoulders. Don’t let me down, boys. If you are successful, I’ll be the next mayor of Paris Valley and we, my friends, will be rich!”

-----

Phillip and Gravitts stood in front of Garret the Parrot men’s clothing shop debating what to do.

“I don’t know, Gravitts, I’m not sure if we should even be here.”

“Look, you already know that you need to make some ‘provements, right?”

“Well, yes, I guess so.”

“Okay, who’s the expert on refind-a-ments ‘round here?”

Phillip corrected Gravitts, “That’s ‘refinements’.”

“Refinements, refind-a-ments, whatever. Anyhow, who’s the expert?”

“That would definitely be Garret the Parrot.”

“Okay! I rest my chest.”

Phillip frowned. “You mean ‘rest your case’.”

“Look, let’s go in and we’ll-” Before Gravitts could finish, the door of the men’s clothing shop opened. Garret stood with hands on his hips looking at them suspiciously. “Hello boys. What manner of mischief are you up to today?” he asked in his charming English accent.

Gravitts nervously started explaining, “Uh, Phillip is in love with Miss Magdalena, but Magdalena ain’t in love with Phillip, and we uh, I mean, Phillip here thought you’d be able to offer some ‘vice.’”

Garret scratched his beak and looked at the scruffy unkempt Phillip from head to toe. “Hummm, there’s no doubt that a complete makeover is needed. Okay, Phillip, I’ll do it as a personal favor to your father. Come inside. I think this is going to take some time.”

Phillip paused, “My father! What does he have to do with this?”

“Listen do you want my valuable assistance to win Magdalena over or not?”

Phillip answered quickly before Garret could change his mind, “Oh yes, yes sir.”

Garret clapped his hands together. “Chop, chop, lets get started. I don’t have all day to waste.”

Phillip and Gravitts obediently follow Garret into his shop.

Gravitts looked up at Phillip. “Don’t worry, Phillip. You’re already a shining prince,” he said boastfully. “I already see the stars in your eyes.”

Garret stopped in his tracks, turned and faced them. “Prince?” Look at him, he’s no prince he’s a fashion disgrace!”

“Hey, watch what you say. Phillip’s my friend!”

“Pipe down, you uneducated rodent!” Garret ordered.

Gravitts looked at Garret, feeling hurt, he quietly found a chair in the corner and watched as Garret gave Phillip a new look.

“First we’ll have to give you a haircut and shave off that straggly beard before my tailor can fit you with some decent clothes. And those *shoes* and that *hat* will have to go!”

Phillip removed his hat. His pet frog leaped to the chair beside Gravitts.  
“Ribbit, Ribbit, Ribbit!”

“You’ve got to leave that slimy little thing at home. No girl wants to compete with a frog.”

Gravitts watched in shock, as Garret turned his friend into a very handsome young man.

When Garret finished with Phillip’s transformation he stepped back to get a better look. “Hummm not bad, not bad at all.” He looked over at Gravitts sitting in the corner. “Come on, you’re next. You can’t go around with Phillip looking like that.” Garret pulled a coat and vest from the rack. “Here, try these on and take these shoes while I find a hat.”

Gravitts humbly put on his new clothes, stood up straight, turned around to admire himself in the mirror. “What a sharp looking possum I am,” he said with a grin painted across his face.

The three of them stood staring at each other in the mirror, nodding with approval.

“Who would have thought the two of you would clean up and look so handsome?” Garret finally offered. “Now, go and impress the girls!”

Phillip picked up his pet frog and quickly slid him into his coat pocket.

Garret escorts the two newly handsome figures to the front of his store.

“Thank you, Garret, we really appreciate your help,” and though it was hard for Phillip to say, he added, “and I know my father will thank you, too.”

Garret watched admiringly as Phillip and Gravitts walked down the street and disappeared around the corner.

“Look! Look! Here she comes now!” Phillip blurted out.

“Who?”

“Miss Magdalena, of course, she’s coming right this way!”

As Magdalena approached, Phillip tipped his new hat and smiled, “Good day, Miss Magdalena.”

Magdalena quickly glanced at Phillip, with a hint of a smile and walked on.

“Did you see that? She didn’t even recognize me.” Phillip said peering over his shoulder hoping Magdalena would remember him and turn back.

“Women, can’t live wid ‘em, can’t live wid out ‘em,” Gravitts said knowingly. “Come my friend let’s show ourselves ‘round town.”

Suddenly, Magdalena stopped, touched her chin in thought, looked back.

“Phillip! That was Phillip Gracey!” She said aloud. “That’s who that was! I thought I recognized him from somewhere. Hummm,” she smiled, “Very impressive indeed!”

-----

On voting day, Phincher and Bumbles arrived at the Town Hall just before closing time. Spotting the steel ballot box bolted to the counter, they waited and watched from the hallway until the last vote was cast before slipping through the door.

Magdalena was busy chatting with a talkative voter with her back turned to the door. Phincher and Bumbles quickly approached the ballot box. Pincher removed the pick lock from his mouth and unlocked the box. He removed the ballots and stuffed them in his coat pockets. Bumbles pulled out the bag of McCobb’s ballots from under his coat and stuffed them in the ballot box and quietly closed the lid. Two ballots fell on the counter. Before he could pick them up Magdalena turned around.

“Oh, I didn’t see you come in. Can I help the two of you?” she asked.

Phincher pointed to the two ballots on the counter, “we’re here to cast our votes.”

“I see. Magdalena picked up the two ballots and dropped them into the slot. She noticed the padlock was unlocked and quickly locked it.

“You should keep that box locked,” Phincher said, as he and Bumbles hurried out the door.

“How did that get open?” Magdalena thought to herself, “How could I’ve been so forgetful?”

-----

Early the next day, Jonathan Gracey, Garret, Willard McCobb and a small crowd gathered on the steps in front of the Town Hall waiting for the final ballot tally.

The Town Hall doors opened. Magdalena paused a few minutes waiting to get the crowd’s attention. “The ballots have been counted,” she announced, “and the new Mayor of Paris Valley is,” she opened the folded paper, frowned and hesitated, “Mr. Willard McCobb!”

The crowd, in shock, went silent and focused their curious attention on McCobb.

McCobb was waiting nearby to give his already prepared acceptance speech. He smiled, tipped his hat and bowed to the crowd several times then moved next to Magdalena.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said in a syrupy voice, “Thank you for electing me as your new mayor. I promise you won’t regret it. I have many changes in mind that will make Paris Valley a city we can all be proud of.”

He went on with a long winded speech promising the people what he knew they wanted to hear, knowing very well that he would not keep his promises. Before he was finished, the crowd gradually started leaving, shaking their heads in disbelief.

-----

Willard McCobb moved into the Mayor's office. He had one thing in mind and wanted to get started. One thing, that is, until he took a liking to the Town Clerk, the beautiful Miss Magdalena.

McCobb tried very hard to impress Magdalena. He called her into his office several times a day for unimportant reasons other than to have her presence and to look into her beautiful large round brown eyes. When he invited her to dinner, she refused, but he didn't give up for he was sure she would change her mind and find him handsome and irresistible.

Late the next afternoon, well after the Town Hall closed for the day, Magdalena brought papers for McCobb to sign. When she handed them to him, he took her hand in his, leaned closed and stared into her eyes. "You and me," he muttered, sending a cold chill down her spin. Magdalena knew his intentions were not honorable and quickly yanked her hand back and hurried out of his office, closing the door behind her.

She was busy typing at her desk and wasn't unaware that McCobb had slipped up behind her until she felt his cold boney hand on her shoulder and got a whiff of his warm smelly breath next to her cheek. In a low ghastly whisper he tried to regain her confidence. "Don't worry my darling. There's always another day,"

Magdalena shouted, "Another day, definitely not! *I AM NOT INTERESTED IN YOU!*" Before she realized, she blurted out, "My interest is in Phillip Gracey!"

"Ha, that boy, that boy couldn't possibly match my status! Have you forgotten that I'm the Mayor of Paris Valley? What does Phillip have to offer? Why, he..." Before McCobb could finish, Magdalena grabbed her hat and pocketbook and quickly ran out of the office slamming the door behind her.

McCobb watched through the window as she disappeared down the street and around the corner before he settled back into his chair, deflated as if shot with a dart.

-----

A few days later, on his way back to his office, McCobb saw Phillip going into the General Store. He was surprised to see how handsome and well-dressed he had become. "Phillip, my competition," he said to himself. "I've got to do something about that boy! I've got to get him out of town before he charms Magdalena."

McCobb tugged at his bushy eyebrows and paced his office floor trying to think of ways to get Phillip out of town. "Ahhh, a brilliant idea! I'll appoint him the diplomat of Paris Valley. It'll be a job he can't resist!"

McCobb called Magdalena into his office. "Magdalena, I want you to contact Phillip Gracey immediately and ask him to come to my office."

"But why, sir?" she asked.

"I have an offer for him," he answered.

"An offer, sir?"

"Yes, yes, now go, and hurry."

When Phillip received McCobb's letter, knowing his questionable reputation, he was reluctant to meet with him, but viewed it as an opportunity to see Magdalena and make up for his last bumbling visit. He arrived at the Mayor's office and was pleasantly greeted and escorted to McCobb's office by Lulu, one of the office assistants.

McCobb was sitting behind his desk leaning back in his chair, his fingers steepled under his chin. When he saw Phillip he stood and reached his long arm across the desk to shake his hand. "Thank you for coming," he said. "Have a seat and I'll get right to the point." Before Phillip could take his seat, McCobb stated, "I've decided to appoint you as the diplomat of Paris Valley."

"Diplomat?" Phillip questioned.

"That's right. How does that sound to you?" McCobb raised his eyebrows and stared at Phillip waiting for his reply.

“Great! Well, uh...,” Phillip was overwhelmed by McCobb’s offer and accepted it right away. “That’s great! I’ll take it! But what do I do?”

McCobb smiled and rocked back in his chair, “I’ll let you know in a few days.”

Phillip stood to leave. McCobb reached across his desk and shook his hand again. Phillip hurried into the clerk’s office to show off his new look and share his good fortune. Magdalena was at the counter assisting a gentleman. She noticed Phillip, smiled and said “I will be right with you, Phillip.” When she finished with the customer, she motioned to him, “Come and have a seat at my desk.”

Phillip walked around the counter and sat in the only chair beside Magdalena’s desk. He was now feeling self-assured and beaming with self-confidence as he told her about his newly appointed position.

Magdalena was mesmerized by Phillip’s appearance and good looks. She listened carefully to every word he was saying and shared his enthusiasm. But in the back of her mind, she was concerned for him. Knowing McCobb’s behavior she was sure he had something evil up his sleeve.

Phillip finished talking and glanced around. He noticed everyone had gone home for the day. He and Magdalena were the only ones in the office. He jumped up from his chair. “Oh, I’m sorry to have taken so much of your time,” he said.

“I really didn’t mind,” Magdalena replied.

“Can I have the pleasure of walking you home?” Phillip suddenly asked not believing these words were coming from him.

“Of course, I’d like that,” she answered.

Thinking they were the last ones in the building, Magdalena grabbed her hat and sweater and locked the doors behind her.

McCobb was working late: Well, not exactly working, but watching with his office door partly open so he could see and hear Magdalena and Phillip.

“I’ve got to work fast. I’ve got to get Phillip out of town if I’m to have a chance with Magdalena,” he said aloud as he wrung his hands and paced the floor.

Before going home McCobb sent a telegram to his old Buddy Pico De'Maage in Penner City explaining that he needed a *big favor*." He went on to say he would be sending his diplomat Phillip Gracey and Phillip's friend Gravitts to Penner City and asked that Pico set them up in the finest hotel and keep them entertained until further notice.

Pico De'Maage worked directly for Mayor Willie Bruin and Served on the city council. He was not only on the city payroll, but on Mayor Bruin's personal payroll as his personal henchman and flunky. It's not that he did anything illegal it's just that it wasn't quiet always ethical.

While waiting for his new assignment, Phillip continued to walk Magdalena home from work. Sunday, she invited him for a picnic in the park. They'd just finished eating and were lying on the grass when Magdalena leaned over and gave Phillip his first kiss. Phillip felt like flying. It was the happiest day of his life and he was sure by the smile on Magdalena face she felt the same.

On hearing back from Pico De'Maage, McCobb called Phillip into his office. "Phillip," he said, "I need you to go to Penner City to take care of some business for me. You can take Gravitts along to help. A friend of mine, Pico De'Maage, will meet you at the train station. He will set you up in a fine hotel. You and Gravitts can dine out, sit back and enjoy yourselves and wait until Pico gives you instructions. Is that clear?" McCobb asked.

"Yes, sir," Phillip was excited to be finally doing something important. "When do we go, he asked?"

"This afternoon, the train leaves at two-thirty. So get your things together and be on *THAT* train."

Before Phillip left Town Hall, he stopped by Magdalena's office to tell her he was leaving town and to say good-bye.

"Oh Phillip, I'm going to miss you. Do you know what you'll be doing?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. I'll get my instructions when I get there. I'm sure it's something important." He kissed her hand lightly, "I'll be back soon," he promised. I need to rush now. I have a lot to do before I catch the train."

“Promise you’ll be careful.”

“Promise,” Phillip rushed out the door.

Gravitts was sitting on the steps when Phillip came out.

“Gravitts, we’ve got to hurry. We’re leaving for Penner City this afternoon. We have to catch the two-thirty train.”

“You mean I’m your partner? Wow!”

“Well, something like that.”

Before leaving, Phillip walked to the back of his house to a patch of tall cool damp grass, reached into his coat pocket and took out his pet frog. Holding it loosely in the palms of his hands, he sadly said, “Go, you are free to go and find yourself another friend.”

“ Ribbit! Ribbit! Ribbit!”

Phillip watched for a moment as his childhood pet happily leapt to its freedom.

-----

Pleased that Phillip was now out of town, McCobb stopped by the funeral home to pluck a rose from a wreath. He placed it on Magdalena’s desk before she arrived for work. When Magdalena saw the wilted rose, knowing well who it was from and where it came from, she tossed it into the waste basket, rejecting McCobb’s advances.

-----

Pico was waiting at the train station when Phillip and Gravitts arrived.

“You’re Phillip Gracey and Gravitts, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m Pico De’Maage. I’m here to take you to your hotel and keep you comfortable while you’re in Penner City.” Pico grabbed Phillip’s and Gravitts’ suitcases and put them in the back of his shiny black car parked in front of the train station.

Never having been in a car, Gravitts said, “Wow, Phillip, me tinks we’re going to have fun here!”

Pico overheard Gravitts. “That’s right, fun it is! Anything you want! Sky’s the limit!”

Pico stopped his car in front of the Ritz Hotel.

“Is this where we’re staying?” Phillip asked.

“Yes, this is the finest hotel in Penner City. McCobb said to give you the finest and this is the finest.

-----

One afternoon Magdalena decided to stay late to finish some filing. McCobb also planned to work late the same evening to complete the deal he was arranging with Penner City. Magdalena thought she was alone until she heard McCobb’s voice from behind, startling her.

“My dear, why are you here so late?” He asked.

“I’m just catching up on some filing, sir.”

“I noticed we’re alone and you’re such a lovely lady.”

“Pardon me, sir.” Magdalena responded.

“Would you care to dine with me tonight?”

“No thank you. I have a lot to do before Phillip comes home.”

“*RATS!*” McCobb called out angrily.

Bumbles and Phincher were hiding under a desks chomping on nuts that they found left in a desk drawer. When they heard McCobb they thought he was calling them and popped their heads out to answer.

“Yes boss,” they said in unison.

McCobb shushed them back with his hand and foot. They got the message and quickly went back into hiding.

“Magdalena, tell me, what do you see in that boy? He’s just a boy, you know. He has no future.”

“He’s handsome, he has a heart of gold, qualities that are hard to find in any man these days and, most of all, we love each other,” she responded.

“*GOLD?* If that’s what you want, I’ve got gold! Soon I’ll have lots of gold. And looks? Well... I may not be the best looking man in Paris Valley, but if you spend some time with me, I’m sure you’ll change your mind.”

“Sir, with all due respect, I don’t agree.”

“Working at Town Hall every night can be such a lonely place. Come to dinner with me, my sweet. You deserve a man of great wealth and power, like me. What girl wouldn’t want to marry a mayor?” Magdalena stood up and put the filing in her desk drawer.

“Where are you going?” McCobb asked.

“I’m going home, sir.” Magdalena grabbed her hat and coat from the rack and hurried out of the office.

Thunder and lightening came from a distance. The warm wind blew across Magdalena’s face giving her a feeling of freedom from McCobb. She took a deep breath of relief and started home. Her heart pined for Phillip. Whispering his name made her tingle. She began to sing and dance with her imaginary Phillip as the rain from the coming storm began to fall.

Before she realized she’d danced herself passed her house. She smiled at the obvious affection she felt for Phillip and made her way back to her door.

-----

After living a week in luxury and dining out, Phillip and Gravitts became bored. Phillip asked Pico when he was going to start working as a diplomat.

“Soon, soon, everything takes time and time is money,” Pico responded.

In his mind, Phillip started to question what was going on. He missed Magdalena and Gravitts was anxious to get back to his simple life in the country.

When Pico didn't come by the hotel at his regular time, Phillip and Gravitts decided to explore the town on their own. They walked through the streets listening to Dixieland music coming from night clubs. Phillip stopped at the door of one of the clubs and looked inside. A band was on stage playing music and beautiful waitresses were serving food.

“Gravitts, this looks like a friendly place to have dinner tonight.”

Gravitts peeked inside, “Me tinks you're right, my friend.”

They went inside and seated themselves in an empty booth and were checking out the menu when a waitress approached their table.

“Can I take your order?” she asked smiling sweetly.

“Yes, oh yes.” Phillip said pointing to a dinner on the menu. “We'll have two of these and two glasses of lemonade, please.”

While waiting for their food, Phillip saw Pico enter the club. He was alone and appeared to be searching for someone.

“Wait here, Gravitts. Pico just came in and I think he's looking for us.” Phillip made his way around the tables and across the room to where Pico had started talking to someone in a booth. Phillip, trying to be polite, stood back, didn't interrupt. Pico, unaware that Phillip was behind him, spoke freely to the man.

Phillip listening to their conversation and realized they were talking about him and Gravitts.

“Those two idiots from Paris Valley, do they know anything about the water agreement?”

“No, no, of course not. They’re just a pair of dumb country bumpkins. They haven’t the slightest idea of what’s going on right under their noses.”

To avoid being noticed, Phillip quickly stepped behind a partition to listen.

“Good, you know we can’t let a word of this out until this deal is final. I’ve already sent Willard McCobb his first payment. Thanks for setting this deal up for me, Pico. You and Willie Bruin’s will get your cut as soon as everything is signed.”

Phillip listened as the two men revealed the details of their secret water deal between Paris Valley and Penner City. He was furious at having been duped along with the citizens of Paris Valley. He returned unnoticed to the booth where Gravitts and his dinner was waiting.

“Gravitts, we’ve got to get back to Paris Valley tonight!”

“Can’t we eat first?”

“Yes, yes, we can eat but we’ve got to hurry!”

“Why is that?”

“McCobb’s a crook! We’ve got to let the citizens of Paris Valley know he’s selling their water before it is too late.”

They quickly ate their dinner and paid the waitress with the money Pico gave them when they arrived in Penner City.

“We’ve got to get out of here without Pico seeing us.” Phillip looked around and spotted the rear door. “Look, follow me. We’ll have to go out the back way.”

-----

The wind was blowing and lightning lit up the sky followed by a loud burst of thunder.

“It looks like a big storm is coming in. We better hurry before it starts to rain,” Phillip told Gravitts.

They rushed to their hotel room and threw their clothes in their suitcases and made their way to the train station. Just as they were about to board the train, the clouds opened up and rain poured down.

“Wow! We barely made it!” Phillip said, wiping the rain from his face.

Soon after the train pulled out of the station, Gravitts fell asleep. Phillip watched the rain and lightning through the window while thinking how he was going to tell his father and the people of Paris Valley about Willard McCobb’s crooked water deal.

Suddenly the train came to an abrupt stop!

Gravitts jumped up. “Are we home?” he asked groggily.

“No, something must be wrong,” Phillip was worried.

At that moment the porter walked in. “I’m afraid we have some bad news folks. The bridge up ahead is washed out so we’ll have to go back to Penner City,” he told the passengers.

“Go back? We can’t!” Phillip exclaimed to Gravitts. “But we must get to Paris Valley tonight! We’ll just have to jump off the train and walk the rest of the way.”

“Jump off the train and walk? In the dark, in the rain?” Gravitts was dumbfounded.

“Yeah, that’s the only way. We’ll go together so we don’t lose each other in the storm, understand?”

“Me tink’s dats a good idea, I guess.” Gravitts responded meekly.

The train started moving. “Quick, grab your suitcase. We’ve got to go now! Get ready, *JUMP!*”

Phillip and Gravitts jumped and fell into tall wet grass and started walking into the stormy night heading toward Paris Valley. They walked hurriedly through fields and streams in the down pour while lightening flashed across the sky.

By morning the storm started to clear and the sun began to shine. Phillip was soaking wet, his clothes stuck to his body. He looked to the sky and reached out and started to laugh. "Gravitts," he said, "what a glorious day, don't you agree?"

"In the light of the bad news you're bringing home about McCobb, you sure seem happy. How come?" Gravitts asked.

"Don't you remember? I'm in love. I'm gonna see Magdalena, beautiful Magdalena." Saying her name made his eyes light up and a smile formed across his face.

"I kind of know but.... What is love ReeEEEE-LeeEEEE like?" Gravitts asked.

"Well, it makes you feel wonderful. With love you can overcome just about anything!"

"Any---ting?"

"That's right. Love is caring for another person more than yourself. Love is tender, glorious, it's... well... it's the most wonderful feeling in the world."

"So dat's what love is."

"It's kind of hard to explain, Gravitts. You know, when you get up in the morning and look out the window and everything's just perfect, and you're sure, absolutely sure, nothing can go wrong. I mean, well... that's how being in love makes you feel. Am I making any sense?"

Gravitts smiled, "Yeah, me tink you is."

"Maybe you'll fall in love someday and find out for yourself."

"Me hope so. It sounds good to me!"

It was noon when Phillip and Gravitts got into town. The sun nearly dried their clothes. Phillip ran his fingers through his long wavy hair to smooth it down and replaced his hat.

They walked through the park, a short cut to Phillip's house.

"Look! Over there, that's Magdalena sitting on the bench." Phillip pointed across the park. "I've got to talk to her," he told Gravitts.

Magdalena was having lunch in the park. She closed her eyes to think of Phillip. She didn't hear anyone was approaching.

Phillip touched her shoulder. "Are you alright?" he asked.

She wiped a tear of happiness from her eye. "Oh, Phillip," she said, "I was just thinking of you. How can I tell you how happy I am that you're back?" She suddenly noticed Phillip's and Gravitts' appearance, "My, you two look a mess. What happened?"

Phillip laughed at her sudden attention and leaned over and kissed her lips gently, urgently, but softly. "Come with me. It's very important. I'll explain later. Right now I need to talk to my father and Garret right away."

Gravitts was happy to be home and ran ahead to Phillip's house.

On their way to his house, Phillip told Magdalena about the shady water deal McCobb had made with his cohorts in Penner City.

"I sensed there was something fishy about McCobb and his election," Magdalena told Phillip, "And then he suddenly decided to make you a diplomat and send you away so he could have more time with me and..."

Phillip interrupted, "Don't worry. It's all going to be okay now, I'm home for good."

When they arrived at Phillip's house, Gravitts had already fallen asleep on the grass.

"Gravitts must be tired. We walked all night in the storm without any sleep." Phillip came up the back porch steps.

“I thought I heard your voice, Phillip. When did you get back?” His mother asked meeting him at the door.

He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, “Just now, Mom. Are Dad and Garret here?” he asked.

“They’re in the living room,” she replied as she looked Magdalena’s way and smiled.

Phillip burst into the living room, interrupting his father’s and Garret’s conversation and began telling them about McCobb and the water deal he’d made with Penner City.

“Garret, we’ve got to stop McCobb before it’s too late. We can’t let him sell our water. Why, what would the people of Paris Valley do without their precious water?” Gracey asked.

“Let’s go down to the Town Hall and confront McCobb face to face. We’ll tell him we refuse to allow the deal to go through.” Garret replied angrily.

When they arrived at the Town Hall, McCobb’s office was locked. Magdalena suggested he might be at the funeral home with Phincher and Bumbles.

“Can I go with you?” Lulu asked. Lulu Filbert was one of Magdalena’s office assistants. When she saw Gravitts they exchanged smiles.

“Yes, close the doors. All of you can come. The more the merrier,” Magdalena replied.

Lulu walked besides Gravitts, occasionally allowing her arm to touch his. Gravitts saw from the corner of his eye she was smiling, trying to attract his attention.

On the way to the funeral home, word traveled quickly about McCobb’s deal. By the time they arrived, a large crowd had joined them with Officer Kruspy in the lead.

From inside the Funeral Home, McCobb heard the racket. “Bumbles go see what’s going on out there, and don’t let anyone in.”

“Yeah, Boss.” Bumbles ran down the long dimly lit hallway to the front door. He opened it just enough to peek out and saw the crowd. He quickly closed the door, but before he could lock it, Gracey pushed it open knocking Bumbles backward on the floor.

“We’re here to see McCobb. Where’s McCobb? We need to see McCobb *NOW!*” Gracey demanded.

Getting to his feet, shaking, Bumbles blurted out, “In the coffin room countin’ the money.” He realized he’d said too much and attempted to run ahead to the back room where McCobb and Phincher were.

“Wait a minute. We’re going with you,” Officer Kruspy said. “I know what a slick one that McCobb can be.”

McCobb and Phincher heard the rush of the crowd coming down the hall. “Quick, hide the money in the coffin! We’ll slide out the side door,” he told Phincher.

Phincher, afraid to touch the body in the coffin, stuffed the money under his coat and ran after his boss, leaving a trail of money behind him.

Officer Kruspy and the crowd poured into the coffin room and saw the bills scattered on the floor. Following the trail, they ran toward the train station.

Phillip saw McCobb and Phincher at the counter buying tickets. “There they are!” He shouted pointing their way.

Officer Kruspy tapped McCobb on the shoulder with his night stick. “Going somewhere, McCobb?” He asked in his thick accent.

McCobb looked at Kruspy and the crowd gathered behind him, his eyes twitching with panic and a bitter expression spread across his face.

“Well, you see sir, uh, we’re just going out of town to take care of some business,” he lied.

“And ya! What’s that under ya coat?” He poked his night stick at the bulge in Phincher’s coat. A bundle of money and loose bills fell to the floor.

McCobb slipped, “I told you to hide the money in the---!”

The crowd was furious and started shouting, “Take him away! Take him away! Take him away!” But Officer Kruspy saw this as an opportunity to get two criminals out of Paris Valley, so he offered them a deal.

“Well now, if ya want to resign as mayor of Paris Valley and leave town toda’, I guess we wouldn’t have to prosecute ya, ‘specially since the evidence was not specifically found on ya’ person,” Kruspy told McCobb. “And ya!” Kruspy momentarily detained Phincher with his nightstick, “Okay, ya can go too!”

McCobb took the hint and ran for the train. Phincher followed. The crowd cheered when they saw the two jump aboard and the train pull away.

Bumbles burst through the crowd. “Hey, Boss, wait for me!”

Kruspy grabbed him by the collar, “Wait a minute! Are ya sure ya want to hang out with those two criminals or would ya’ be interested in changin’ ya’ ways?”

Bumbles looked around at the crowd and saw them smiling and nodding their heads in agreement. Deep down they knew he wasn’t a bad sort, just misled.

Gravitts called out, “Come on, Bumbles, you won’t regret it!”

“Oh, alright, I’ll stay!” he said with newfound conviction.

The crowd cheered him on as he joined them.

Garret turned to the crowd, “ May I suggest we all head back to the Town Hall and cast our votes for the gentleman who should have been our mayor in the first place, Mr. Jonathan Gracey!”

The crowd raised their arms and cheered. “Gracey! Gracey! Gracey!”

Gravitts lowered his arms on Lulu’s shoulders and watched her giggle. He was ecstatic. He gave her shoulders a hug, took her hand and looked up at Phillip and Magdalena.

“Yeah, Phillip, my friend, me tinks you’re right. It’s gonna be another sunny day!”

The End

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