

## ONE

My name is Rudyard Mack. I am with Security with the New York Public Library Central Building at the crossroads of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue in New York City. Every morning, approaching this great edifice at the end of my walk to work, I think of it rising like a beacon of scholarship in a sea of hustling commerce and lost souls.

When I arrived before nine one morning, three cops were questioning the Assistant Business Manager who gave me the high sign over their shoulders to go to the boss's office at once.

As a Business Manager Sharkey Bugofsky was miscast in my opinion. I could see him as a Somoza, the aging dictator of a small third-world country, indulging his excesses. Bugofsky was in his best humor first thing in the morning and got progressively nastier during the day. By three in the afternoon, he was drunk. Dissipation had begun to show in his face despite his dark and rugged good looks. His body, which had the frame of an athlete, was in flabby decline. I thought of him as a disappointed, bitter man.

His secretary motioned me inside with her eyebrows. Bugofsky, barking over the telephone, glared at me.

"Got trouble, Rudyard," he said, slamming down the receiver. "We almost lost some postage stamps."

"The Miller Collection?" I was actually surprised that someone would try to steal from it.

Bugofsky related the facts of the attempted theft in angry staccato sentences with caustic asides about blacks making good runners but bad watchmen.

It seems that the night watchman had come from the blackness of the sixth-floor book stacks as the first glimmer of dawn pierced the tall windows of the Economics Division. As he entered the east reading room, he detected a whirring sound. He picked up his pace, strode to the next room and turned his flashlight at the glass-paneled offices under the windows overlooking Fifth Avenue. Silence. Suspicious, he unlocked the door to the hallway, closed it quietly behind him, and stepped carefully across the marble floor to the balcony overlooking the main entrance. The great window of the front caught the yellow light from the street lamps on Fifth Avenue. Through it, he looked down the deserted 41st Street in the dawn

light of the eastern sky Again he heard the sound but this time distinctly

He descended the staircase, crossed the main floor, and peered up and down the long hallway His flashlight caught the open door to the Comptroller's Office. Summoning his courage and keeping his light low, he moved swiftly to the door and peeked in. The sound of an electric drill assaulted his ears. He rushed part way down the room. A white man, crouching beside a small light at the end of the office, looked up, dropped his drill and reached threateningly into his coat pocket. The watchman fled. He loped down the hallway, through the iron gates, and leaped down a flight of stairs to the driveway of the inner courtyard and into the watchman's booth at the 40th Street entrance. He phoned the police.

He stayed in the booth and gaped nervously at the great door which was the only exit kept open throughout the night. Crouching in the booth, he was getting angry at the slowness of the police when he heard a car screech to a stop. He flicked a switch and the great door moved up. Two cops ducked under it. He ran out to meet them, crying, "He's in there!"

"Trouble was," Bugofsky sneered, "he wasn't in there."

The one hundred recessed glass panels near the Information Desk attracted scores of Stamp aficionados who pulled them out and studied the stamps for hours. The intruder had intended to disconnect the alarm system by drilling into the wall behind the panels, taking away the backing to the cabinets and drawing them back into the privacy of the Comptroller's Office.

"He vanished," Bugofsky said, "but he left his drill behind."

"How'd he get in?"

"That's your problem, Rudyard. We also don't know how he got out, or if he got out. He might be here right now. He could step out from behind a bookcase during the day and walk out with the crowd." Bugofsky flashed a grin and then frowned. "You're the intellectual! You find out!"

"One guard isn't enough," I said, ignoring Bugofsky's little jibe.

"Tell that to Henry Betterton," Bugofsky growled. He raised his voice to a high pitch, "The budget doesn't call for it.' That's what he'll tell you. So, Rudyard, catch this bastard before he strikes again."

This imperative was said in a tone of dismissal as Bugofsky began to leaf through the folders in front of him. I was wise not to ask another question. Stroking my hand pensively down the side of my face, I felt its leanness as a sort of reassurance and strode out of the office into the hunt.

The night watchman who was waiting around to be dismissed by the police gave me a clue. "He got red hair."

I inspected the stamp panels to see what the intruder was after. I recognized the Postmaster Provisionals. They were issued by the postmasters of a dozen cities between 1845 and 1847 when Congress authorized uniform postal rates but did not provide for stamp manufacture. The postmasters signed or initialed these make-shift stamps. The rest had no meaning for me, except for the prize of the collection, "the Inverted Jenny."

"Beautiful, isn't she?" said a voice behind me.

I turned to look at a man of about thirty, slim with blue eyes and reddish hair. He held a notebook in one hand and was studiously noting down details of the stamps.

"What's beautiful about a plane flying upside down?" I asked to draw him out. I was curious about the special kind of obsession for stamps which I was told that all stamp collectors had to some degree.

"I mean the colors," he protested in a deep voice with a rough edge to it. "That deep carmine border and the heavenly blue center. Just fabulous! And its history is beautiful. I mean a stamp like that has an interesting history."

"What do you mean, history?" I smiled in disbelief.

"Are you a tourist?" he asked mockingly.

"No, I'm trying to learn." I looked intently serious.

"Well, that 24-cent stamp was one of a sheet printed in 1918 for Riggs Bank in Washington to commemorate a new airmail route. The Post Office didn't discover that the airmail plane came out upside down until after it gave the first sheet to a guy called Robey from the bank. It destroyed the others but couldn't get the first sheet back. Robey sold it to a Philadelphia syndicate for \$15,000. It was broken up and the stamps were sold individually. By 1939 each stamp was worth \$4,000."

"How much today?" I nodded in wonderment.

The man rounded his eyes in good humor. "You guess," he said. "Look here." He pulled out the next panel. "These inverted centers of 1869 are beautifully designed and printed, but Columbus is landing in America upside down. In 1939, this 15-cent dark-blue and red-brown was worth 2,000 used and 10,000 unused. It's worth four times as much now. These stamps over here, this 1909 bunch, they're called star plates because a star was added to the imprint to help divide them, the perforations being bad. In 1910 the watermark on U.S. stamps changed from the old double-lined letters to small single-lined letters. So stamps with the old watermark and the new starred plates were issued for only one year. So, you see, these 5-cent perforated stamps could bring up to 80,000 bucks." His enthusiasm was contagious, but he seemed as keen about their market value as for their characteristics as stamps.

"How do you know all this?" I asked innocently.

"I'm a keen amateur," the man smiled broadly. "Besides, do you know somebody tried to steal them last night?"

I stepped back in surprise. "What paper do you work for?"

The man laughed shortly "I'm not a reporter. I just want to get a last look at these before they go off public view." He moved away.

Pretending to survey the area of the cabinets, I stood back, took out my pocket camera surreptitiously and snapped the redhead from the side. This was one more picture to add to my rogue's gallery of mug shots of visitors, readers, staff members. I was about to engage the garrulous stranger with another question when the librarian at the Information Desk called me. She held out the telephone receiver and whispered, "It's Mr. Bugofsky."

Bugofsky's voice sounded hysterically high. "Get up to the main reading room. An encyclopedia is missing. Christ! a whole goddamn encyclopedia. If it's a fifty volume set, I'm going to tell Betterton to shove it! We need manpower. And listen! I want a report on how that guy got into the building on my desk tomorrow morning!" He slammed down the receiver.

How could a thief know his way around a building the size of two city blocks with a maze of corridors and back staircases that would confuse the Cretan Minotaur and expect to disappear with the postage stamps? And how could a guy walk out past the guard with a multi-volumed encyclopedia? They must have been inside jobs.

That would be the rational conclusion, but after twenty years with the New York Public Library I was prepared for anything irrational.