

The Discreet Retrieval Agency #2:  
*TEETOTALED*

*Everything in life that's any fun, as somebody wisely observed, is either immoral, illegal or fattening.*  
—P. G. Wodehouse

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July 14, 1923

The afternoon Sophronia Whiddle offered us the diary job, it was so hot you could've sizzled bacon on the sidewalk. Which wasn't a half bad idea, come to think of it, except that I was out of funds for bacon. I'd been living on shredded wheat for days. All right, hours.

My detecting partner Berta Lundgren and I were reading at the kitchen table in our poky little Washington Square apartment, waiting for the telephone to ring. Stagnant city air puffed in from the window. My Pomeranian, Cedric, panted in front of an electric fan. I yawned, and turned a page of the latest issue of *Thrilling Romance*.

"Mrs. Woodby, would it be remiss of me to suggest that you spend your leisure hours reading *edifying* publications?" Berta asked in her stern Swedish accent. She held up her book. *Mexico City Mayhem*, by Frank B. Jones, Jr. The cover depicted a man in a fedora wrestling a sinister-looking fellow in some sort of Aztec temple.

"*That* is edifying?" I asked.

"Indeed. Thad Parker's advice for decrypting ancient hieroglyphics could benefit our detective agency. *Thrilling Romance* is merely, well, *pulp*."

"But Jake Cadwell, Wall Street tycoon, is about to propose marriage to innocent young Lucinda from the typing pool. It's all she's ever dreamed of."

"I do realize you are pining for the absent Ralph Oliver—"

"Pining? What absolute hooley."

"—but between you and me, Mrs. Woodby, if a man abruptly ceases to telephone, well, it is an indication that he has lost interest."

"I don't give a squirrel's acorn about what Ralph Oliver may or may not be interested in. Besides, he's on a job in Cuba."

"If you say so."

I gave *Thrilling Romance* a shake and resumed reading.

The clock ticked.

I looked up. "I happened to notice that *you* being like a broken spring every time the telephone jingles."

"I am hopeful for detective work."

"Not hopeful that Jimmy the Ant wishes to squire you the movie palace?"

"Mr. Ant must keep a low profile for a time."

"He's hiding from the Feds, you know."

Berta sent me a dirty look, patted her gray bun, and went back to her book.

Is this what had become of the newly-hatched Discreet Retrieval Agency? Two sweaty, bickering ladies waiting for ginky fellows to telephone?

We needed work.

A knock at the apartment door launched me to the little entry foyer. Berta wasn't far behind. Cedric made a half-hearted yap but stayed in the kitchen. He had been lackluster

lately because he was on strict kibble rations. If he didn't slim down in time for his photograph session in two weeks, the people at Spratt's Puppy Biscuits weren't going to use him in their advertising campaign. Cedric's career would be over before it began.

"You do not have shoes on, Mrs. Woodby," Berta said. "If it is a client—"

"Oh, they'll understand," I said, and opened the door. At first it seemed that no one was there. Just the stairwell, stinking of mildew and fried onions. Then I noticed the snub-nosed five-year-old boy.

"Oh, hello, Sam," I said. "What have you there?"

"Five cents, m'am," Sam lisped. He held up a grubby nickel. "Ma said this is for finding Puffy."

"Thanks awfully, Sam, but why don't you keep your money? Tell your mother the job is on us. Puffy was only behind the water tank on the roof. He wasn't really lost."

"Okay, sure, thanks something fierce, Mrs. Woodby!" Sam pocketed the nickel and scampered up the stairs in the direction of his family's third-floor apartment.

I shut the door and turned.

Berta blocked the foyer doorway like a daunting garden gnome. "This simply will not do," she said.

"You're preaching to the choir."

"What has our commission been since we printed our business cards? Zilch."

"Don't remind me. I drank the last drop of whiskey last night. I'm now an unwilling teetotaler."

We drifted back to the kitchen.

In the past month, our fledgling agency had solved a total of five cases: Disappearing milk bottles, nicked newspapers, two lost cats (including Puffy) and a spying endeavor involving the teenaged Martin Ulsky and his two-timing ways. The only payment we'd accepted was a set of Mrs. Bent's hand-knitted egg cozies. The egg cozies *were* pretty cute.

"The rent will be due again," Berta said.

"That's the trouble with rent."

"Perhaps we should take out a larger newspaper advertisement. I *knew* the one-and-a-half inch square would not attract enough notice."

Another knock sounded on the door. Cedric didn't bother yapping this time.

Berta and I locked desperate eyes.

"For pity's sake, Mrs. Woodby, put on your shoes."

Once I'd stuffed my feet into a pair of t-straps, Berta opened the door.

"I had almost decided that I had the wrong address," a stout, elegant, middle-aged woman said. "But I see it is indeed you, Lola Woodby." Her eyes flicked to Berta. "And . . . your cook?"

"Mrs. Lundgren used to be my cook," I said. "How pleasant to see you, Mrs. Whiddle." Seeing Sophronia Whiddle was about as pleasant as an ingrown toenail. Sophronia was not only a New York *grande dame*, but my own mother's bosom friend. Mother, by the way, had no inkling that I'd gone into the gumshoe trade. I was supposed to be mourning my recently popped-off ball and chain, Alfie. But since Alfie had left me high and dry, I was no longer a pampered, thirty-one year old Society Matron. I was a working lady. At least, I was *trying* to be a working lady.

Sophronia did a once-over of my wrinkly, last-season dress, my mussed dark brown bob, and my wide mouth and blue eyes that I hadn't spruced up with lipstick or mascara. I was conserving the last of my department store cosmetics.

"Might I come in?" Sophronia asked.

“Of course,” I said.

Berta and I led Sophronia through to the sitting room. I slid magazines and dime novels under a sofa cushion. I hid the dregs of last night’s highball behind knick-knacks on the mantel. “Please, sit,” I said.

Sophronia perched gingerly on the sofa as though she feared contracting a health concern. Which was indeed a faint possibility, given that this was Alfie’s former love nest. Untold cavortings with chorus girls had occurred on that sofa.

Berta and I sat in the two chairs facing the sofa.

“What brings you here, Mrs. Whiddle?” I asked. “I wasn’t aware that Mother knew of this address. Is it something to do with the Ladies’ Opera Society?”

“Your mother knows nothing of this, and she never shall.”

Oh, thank goodness.

Sophronia extracted a slip of newsprint from her handbag and unfolded it to reveal our advertisement. “‘The Discreet Retrieval Agency’? ‘No job too trivial?’”

“Oh. Right. Yes, that’s us,” I said. “You weren’t surprised to see us, yet our names aren’t on the advertisement. How did you know?”

“Does it matter? I have a job for you. I wish to keep the matter among the *right sort* of people, you see.” Sophronia folded the paper and replaced it in her handbag. “You must retrieve my daughter Grace’s diary.”

“Can’t you do that yourself?” I asked.

“No, no. Quite impossible. You see, Grace is a peculiar girl, an awkward wallflower, really, and although, alas, she is not terribly *bright*—she takes after her poor deceased father’s family in that regard—she has, since the age of ten, been a passionate diarist. Scribbles in it incessantly, keeps the back-logs locked in a small safe in her bedroom. She has always guarded her diary with an unbecoming *ferocity*.”

“Would you explain, Mrs. Whiddle?” Berta asked.

“Once when Grace was fourteen years old—she is nineteen now, you know—I was mildly concerned about her possible interest in a rather too forward grocer’s delivery boy. I wished to look into her diary to discover if I had any real reason to worry. Well, I attempted to take it from Grace while she was sleeping—she sleeps with it under her pillow—and she woke, raving and thrashing, and she bit me! It was terrifying, really.”

“Why do you wish for us to retrieve this diary?” I asked.

“Grace is to be married in eight days—surely you are aware of this, Mrs. Woodby. It is to be the society wedding of the summer. I believe I sent you an invitation *months* ago.”

“I’d plum forgotten,” I said.

“Grace is to marry Gilbert Morris—you *do* know the Morrises?”

I nodded. Winfield Morris, Gilbert Morris’s father, was not only a high-society fat cat but a New York state senator.

“Grace will not have another chance like this,” Sophronia said. “She is plump, you see, and she requires glasses. I fear there may be things in her past, recorded in the diary, that could jeopardize her marriage.”

“How do you propose that we retrieve the diary?” I asked.

“How? Well, I would assume that devising the *how* of the matter is *your* job, Mrs. Woodby.”

True. “From your house?”

“No, no. From the health farm. Grace is booked in for the week.”

“If your daughter is to be a bride,” Berta said, “why is she visiting a health farm?”

“To slim,” Sophronia said. “She will wear my own wedding gown and the

seamstress has already let it out to its *utmost* capacity. I told Grace it was up to her to do the rest.”

“A nice strong girdle might do the trick,” I said.

Berta said, “In my village in Sweden, the plump girls were the most popular. Men prefer girls who are liberal with butter.”

Sophronia compressed her lipsticked mouth. “At *any* rate, while Grace is booked into Willow Acres Health Farm on Long Island—do you know it?”

I fell sideways in my chair. “No,” I lied.

“But I understand that your brother-in-law, Dr. Chisholm Woodby, is the owner and head doctor,” Sophronia said.

“Oh, *that* Willow Acres. Yes. I mean, no. I mean to say *no*, we simply can’t accept the job.”

“Of course we will accept the job,” Berta said, cutting me a death glare.

I got up and went to the window. I had to *look* like I was noodling profoundly, even if there wasn’t an ice cube’s chance in Hell that I would say yes. “The job will be compromised,” I said over my shoulder. “Not only are you, Mrs. Whiddle, my own mother’s friend, but Dr. Woodby would not be keen on me checking into his farm. We aren’t precisely pals.”

“We are a *discreet* agency, Mrs. Whiddle,” Berta said loudly, “and as such we select our cases with great care. . . .”

“Yes, of course,” Sophronia said. “You must discuss it in privacy. I’ll just go and fix my hat in the powder room.”

“Down the hallway on the right,” I said.

Berta and I waited until we heard the bathroom door shut.

“Are you *mad*, Mrs. Woodby?” Berta whispered. “We *must* take this job. We are nearly broke.”

“If my mother finds out about our agency, she’ll be angrier than a wet cat and she’ll do everything in her power to put an end to it. She will say I’m ruining the family’s social standing and Father’s Wall Street connections. That I’m crushing Andy’s and Lillian’s” — these were my siblings— “chances of being invited to play tennis with Vanderbilts and Rockefellers and, oh, I don’t know, the King of England. And she’d be *correct*.”

“Your mother will find out about our agency sooner or later.”

“Golly, I hope not. It’s grisly enough that I’m making a mess of my *own* life without bringing down my entire family. Anyway, Berta, what about Chisholm? If we go to his health farm, we’ll be at his mercy! I wonder what he does to his patients at that farm. I’d bet a million bucks that health bread has something to do with it.”

“Health bread?” Berta hesitated. “Well, it will only be for a day or two, surely.”

“There’s no guarantee of that.”

“If we are to make a go of this agency, we must do our utmost. Are you willing to do you utmost, Mrs. Woodby?”

Berta was right: I had to take the plunge. Say toodle-pip to my old life and take my future by the horns.

“Well?” Sophronia said, coming back into the sitting room. “If you don’t wish to accept the job, there is another agency that—”

“We’ll do it,” I said.

“I might rely upon your utmost discretion?”

“Of course,” I said, and Berta nodded.

We worked out all the details. Sophronia would pay for our stay at Willow Acres

and we would endeavor to pry the diary from Grace Whiddle's clutches posthaste. Once we delivered the diary to Sophronia at her Long Island estate, Clyde Bluff, we would collect our fee of five hundred clams.

The Discreet Retrieval Agency was back on its feet.