

The Key To Truth

By Wayne Power

A browned envelope had been pushed through my mail slot during the night, without a stamp, Typical, I thought. It must have come by a person who did not want any detection from an aging, and sometimes, nosey neighbourhood. I suspected that the nightly depositor did not want to confront the senior occupant living alone in his New York Brownstone. I had never married. The old reddish brown apartment complex had been my escape into independence. I had left home before my twenties. I am now reaching my mid-seventies with many others in the complex. A few couples occupied the larger units. Each Brownstone was two storied. In the top apartment above me, I noticed a senior lady had recently moved in. From her first day, she appeared friendly. Every morning, when I retrieved my bottle of milk from my stoop, she waved at my routine. Three decades had passed. My self-imposed seclusion and retirement was punctuated with regular habits. The old building's façade was deteriorating. I had begun to re-examine my own anti-social pretence to the world of the Brownstones. Someday, I would introduce myself to this new neighbour. But for now, I had to read this unsolicited late-night delivery.

Still in my robe, I took the aged envelope and shuffled towards my den. As I ambled down the parquettted hallway, I detected a musty, mildew air wafting from my clenched palm. As I glanced down, I noticed, "My Dearest Charles", delicately written, yet faded, across the face of the sachet. Few people had ever addressed me as "Charles" during my working years. On my office window, while I was in service, I had etched "Chuck Winters-PI" on the frosted glass. For me, that said it all. I was for hire; I was keen; I was a new private investigator. I devoured "*Dick Tracy*" comics during my adult career. Every issue fulfilled my early notions of always wanting to be a detective.

Returning to the envelope, the faded calligraphy was well-crafted, by a quilled pen. I assumed that the style was sourced by a female author who had hand-scripted my name. Many years of PI experience, specializing in graphology, kicked in immediately. From the letter formations, "she" was educated, reclusive, yet friendly and impulsive. I could tell from the lack of loops and baseline intersections in the script that "she" was under duress when she wrote the salutation. It had a haste and hurried style. Handwriting analysis had been my forte.

I suddenly realized that today was my retirement anniversary. Thirty years had passed since retiring from a career of relative success. I also lived well on family stock money. For me, the October 29th 1929 "crash" was soft. Frugal independence and savings saw me through the Great Depression. Money seemed to come unexpectedly to me from all directions. Most cases paid the bills, as did my integrity. Contracts were challenging, but eventually I solved them; that is, except for one. That one always baffled me...all those loose ends. I was never able to solve that particular client's case of a dead philanthropic husband and his lost wealth. No funds, no disbursement. My short-lived, prospective client had disappeared, mysteriously. AWOL. I lost contact with her that June of '29, and concluded that the police had taken over. Our agreement was closed "null and void"-- no stipend, no retainer. It was my lost leader...end of story.

I continued solving "cold cases", examining and typing documents, searching for lost family members, decoding blackmail letters, and living in my brownstone office. I became a real Private

Investigator – extraordinaire. In spite of the hard times, my reputation soared through the 30s...that is until 1939. With the outbreak of war, the 40s quickly changed everything. My services began declining over the war years. By the 1950s, I could not compete with all the new investigative technology. Decoding “modem” gadgetry was abounding. Teletype machines brought stock reports to wire services. Thinking back now, the Cold War of the 50’s ushered in my retirement. The newspapers of the 20s used simple phone-linked multiplex devices. The 30s were another story. In a new 1939 catalog by Radio Shack, I read about the “Model K” (for kitchen table). If I had had any spare money at the time, I would have invested in that computing device. An internationally known binary mathematician, “George Stibitz”, had just completed the work on his Complex Number Calculator in ’39. It was capable of adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing complex numbers. Personal taxation was being used to support the war effort. Everyone needed a calculating machine to do number crunching, even during depressed times. Modems grew out of the need to connect teleprinters over ordinary phone lines while calculators and computers evolved out of a need to account for profits and losses.

After briefly reminiscing over technology, my past history of finances and opportunities, and my career, I returned again to my present situation involving this mysterious letter. I carefully slid an old ivory-carved letter opener along one side of the sachet. Reaching inside with two arthritic fingers, I pulled out the contents of a sweetly-scented folded paper. My old eyes widened with astonishment as I quickly glanced at the salutation. I spied the closing signature. There, before me, was handwritten a familiar autograph, simply, “Clara”. I detected a heartfelt apologizing as I scanned the complimentary closing. “Deepest Regrets” The valediction caused me to reminisce yet again.

Clara Daniels had been that client who disappeared without a trace all those many years ago. This letter was from her ghost revisiting me, pulling at my heart, almost arriving in heart-attack mode. I least expected the memory of her to flood back to me, but it did. I carefully sat down to recover. Who had delivered this letter from the past? And, why was it now being delivered so secretively? My eyes needed to adjust to Clara’s handwritten composition. I held a single, folded, scented page with contents waiting to be revealed. My curiosity was piqued. I happened to notice a seal on the other end of the envelope’s flap. It was, as if tampering had recently occurred.

Since I was alone, I decided to read the letter aloud under good lamplight, from the security of my padded armchair. I was just about to put the envelope aside, when a shiny key dropped out and clinked onto my hardwood floor. I managed to pick it up with frail fingers. It was odd to see such a newly cut key paired with such an old correspondence. I examined the brass. Clutching the key, I began to read the page. I eagerly hoped that key would explain the truth of the letter. I read with anticipation. The date struck me with the greatest surprise. There, titled at the top right-hand corner of the letter, was written “June 8th 1929”!

It was odd to be reading a letter dated almost fifty-five years old, especially being laced with a sweet fragrance of Lily of the Valley. Or was that Lavender assailing my nostrils? No, I trusted my nose memory. Upon closer breathing, I deduced it indeed was Lily of the Valley. That perfume was the fragrance that Clara had worn the last time she visited my office. I began to remember even more. Mrs. Daniel was such a fine looking young widow always dressed in “flapper” style with feathered haberdashery...real spiffy!! What a chassis, as I remember. She had married into wealth at a young age. Her old philanthropic husband could have been her daddy! He had died of a heart attack.

Clara stated to me that that the old “croak’s” will was missing. His body was duly processed, but his estate remained in escrow pending Clara’s appearance and the finding of the will’s whereabouts. To this day, I do not know if the estate was ever resolved. I knew that Clara was depending upon me to locate the missing will and money. The will would determine Clara’s rightful spousal inheritance and settle the intestate condition. That was my threefold agreement: find will, count the dough, prove inheritance. I was never able to fulfill the case. Poor Clara was disheartened the last time I saw her. She seemed hopeless with no results coming her way from my daunting task. Then, she up and vanished.

The letter opened with...

My Dearest Charles,

June 8th 1929

“To Mine own self be true”. I must be authentic with you. I must abide by my conscience and follow this sage advice. I share with you my heavy heart.

Please allow me to take my leave back to England, for I have enlisted as a correspondent aide in Ramsay MacDonald’s newly founded Labour government. Rumours of war appear to be proliferating in Europe. I am driven to avert any mongering. Alas, my newly-found suffrage has also given me much courage, in all aspects of my life. I am far from being an innocent “Flapper” girl. I declare to you. I have abandoned you and my contrived case. Thus, it is my hope that this letter will explain my actions, my dear. Please forgive me for leaving you in the lurch. Time did not allow me to meet you once more before I left for abroad. You deserve an explanation.

June 10th Firstly, our agreement must be hereafter “null and void”, for your intended retainer has recently been used for my steerage and sundries. My necessities became urgent and profound. Seeking asylum in the old country was my only alternative to escape being found out. Yes, dear Charles, it was I who you were seeking. I needed to claim my rightful inheritance myself. I am in possession of his despicable will. If I had not retrieved the money first, his will would have been read expressing his desires. He wanted to donate it all to his many “causes”, to his acquaintances and to his casual flirtations. I was not about to let that happen. Before I could let you find me out, I needed to export myself out of America away from Lady Liberty. I admit. Yes, I am a common criminal. But the courts ruled in my favour after I had destroyed the will. My only perceived guilt is not being honest and truthful to you. I must now profess my deepest love that has grown from our first meeting. I must now go to dinner and will reflect upon my admission to you.

June 30th As I write these words from my deck chair, I have mustered more courage. I am thankful for its possession. For now, I share with you my greatest secret affection. You, Charles, have touched my heart deeply. I burn for moments in your arms. I admit my truth, in my loneliness, as this ship sails to my destiny. My face reddens in this sea wind. Alas, my words were choked back, in your presence. My hope is that this letter will find its way to you, eventually, God willing. I pray for your understanding and forgiveness.

July 4th With celebrations around me, I find it difficult to concentrate. Lastly, if ever we shall meet again, either in this life or in the hereafter, may you find it in your heart to

wave in my direction? Forgive me. Never forget me, where ever life`s journeys take you. God grant that his mercy will follow me.

I remain,

Deepest regrets, Clara

I mentally listed my clues and assumptions:

- The chronology in the letter revealed Clara’s conscience and her distress, at the time.
- Fifty-five years had passed.
- The letter was never stamped and apparently never mailed.
- As I turned the page over, an even greater puzzle had been added.
- In the same calligraphy, yet in a shakier hand, two finely-penciled lines were added.
- I thought. Could Clara actually be still alive? Had she recently written more for me to read?
- From the 1985 allusion, it was definitely a recent addendum from the present-day.
- A “PS” was from Clara, with a newly cut key.
- The key of truth accompanied her short postscript.

She had given me a cryptic case to solve: PS. 1985 AD-G CS–PO1929
IOU=PIF

The next day, I located a safety deposit box numbered 1929 at the postal outlet in Grand Central Station. I discovered the key opened more than the past. Payment in Full. A new photograph was neatly wrapped around a bundle of small old denominations. Like a true detective, I recognized that the currency was crumpled and worn, but still negotiable. As soon as I returned to my Brownstone complex, I knew what I needed to do. Introductions were definitely in order. Her smile was all too familiar. Her wave meant even more.