

The afternoon sun poured brightly into the office of the manager of Guildenstern's Stores, Madison Avenue, New York, but there was no corresponding sunshine in the heart of Homer Pyle, the eminent corporation lawyer, as he sat there. He had in the opinion of his companion in the room something of the uneasy air of a cat on hot bricks. Nor is it difficult to probe the reason for his loss of aplomb. A good corporation lawyer can generally take it as well as dish it out, but it is trying him too high when you telephone him in the middle of the day's work to inform him that his sister has just been arrested for shoplifting. In similar circumstances a Justice of the Supreme Court would wriggle and perspire.

It added to Homer's discomfort that he was being interviewed not by the manager, an old college friend from whom he could have expected sympathy and consideration, but by one of those sleek, shiny young men managers collect about them, the sort of young man whom he himself might have employed in his Wall Street office as a junior clerk. And from this stripling's manner sympathy and consideration were markedly absent.

He dabbed at his forehead with his handkerchief. He had a large, round face, mostly horn-rimmed spectacles, and its pores opened readily when he was agitated.

'There must be some mistake,' he said.

'Yup,' said the shiny young man. 'She made it.'

'Mrs Clayborne is a wealthy woman.'

'Why wouldn't she be, when her shopping costs her nothing?'

'Why should she purloin goods from a department store?'

'Search me. All I know is we caught her with them.'

'It must have been a prank. She did it on a sudden impulse, just to see if she could do it.'

'And she found out she couldn't.'

The thought may have occurred to Homer that the shiny young man, like Jean Kerr's snake, was having all the lines and that he himself was merely playing straight for him, for at this point he relapsed into a sombre silence. He sat musing on his sister Bernadette. Hers, he had long been aware, was a nature which led her too often to act on impulse. There was the time when she had plunged into the Central Park lake in a form-fitting tweed dress from Tailored Woman to rescue a waterlogged Pekinese, and that other time when she had beaten a tough egg into a scrambled egg with her umbrella for kicking a stray cat. More than most women she seldom gave a clue as to what she would be up to next.

But if one raised one's eyebrows at these and similar exercises in self-expression, at shoplifting one definitely pursed the lips. Here, one felt, she had gone too far. Not her fault, of course. It was, he supposed, a sort of mental illness. Paradoxically, she helped herself because she could not help herself. Their mutual aunt Betsy, now deceased, had suffered in the same way and had come to grief during the Autumn sales at Gimbel's. It had been until today the great scandal in the family.

The shiny young man was speaking again, this time on a more cheerful note.

'The boss says to tell you he won't prefer charges.'

This evidence that the old college spirit still lingered in the bosom of the man up top caused an immediate improvement in Homer's morale. It meant that there was going to be no publicity, and it was the thought of publicity that had burned into his soul like an acid.



'Provided,' the speaker continued, and the world became dark again.

'Provided?' he quavered.

'Provided you get her out of the city right away.'

Homer's sigh of relief was virtually a snort.

'That can be managed.'

'It better be.'

'I mean,' Homer explained with a dignity he could not have achieved five minutes earlier, 'that I am leaving for Europe almost at once and can take Mrs Clayborne with me. I am going to Brussels to attend the conference of the P.E.N.'

The effect of these words was sensational. The shiny young man drew his breath in sharply. A new light had come into his eyes, which until then had had the icy glare of a district attorney cross-examining a shifty witness.

'P.E.N.?' He seemed stunned. 'But you aren't a writer.'

'In my spare time I write occasional poetry.'

'You do? Well, I'll be darned. So do I.'

'I find it soothing.'

'Me, too. Keeps you from going loco in the rat race. Ever have any published?'

'A few in the smaller magazines.'

'Same here. They don't pay much.'

'No indeed.'

'What sort do you do?'

'Lyrical mainly.'

'Mine are mostly songs of protest.'

'I have never written a song of protest.'

'You ought to try one some time.'

The atmosphere in the manager's sanctum had now changed completely, and essentially for the better.

Homer, who had been regarding the shiny young man as a particularly noxious specimen of a younger generation with which he was never at his ease, took another look at him and immediately became aware of his many

merits. The shiny young man, who had conceived at the outset an immediate distaste for Homer because he was so obviously rich – just, in fact, the sort of capitalist he wrote songs of protest about – saw in him now an unfortunate toad beneath the harrow who was more to be pitied than censured if his sisters kept getting pinched for shoplifting. The thing, in short, had taken on the quality of a love feast.

'Look,' said the shiny young