

# Poor Economy

THE STORY OF AN AMATEUR IN BURGLARY AND A NOVICE  
IN DETECTIVE WORK

By Ray Cummings

THE local manager of the Globe Protective Association, specialists in burglary insurance, stared across his desk at the young man before him—a pleasant-looking young man with keen blue eyes, a shock of red hair, a pugnacious chin, and powerfully broad shoulders, who sat diffidently on the edge of his chair, with a huge bundle of newspapers across his knees.

"Why should I take you on as an adventurer?" the manager repeated. "Especially as you say you haven't had any experience of the work."

Jimmy Martin leaned forward earnestly.

"Because I might do you a lot of good. I'm only asking for a trial." He saw the manager's glance rest on the newspapers he was holding. "That's what I wanted to tell you about, Mr. Gregg," he added quickly. "I've been studying the Lead Pencil Willy burglaries. I've read everything that's been printed about every one. Here are all the different papers—I've saved them for two months." He saw that he had aroused the manager's interest, and went on swiftly. "This Lead Pencil Willy is sure to come to Seattle. You'll have to get after him."

"The police—" Gregg began.

"The police didn't do anything in Frisco, did they? Or in Portland? Or up in Sitka, where Willy started? If you depend on them, you'll go broke. That's honest, Mr. Gregg, and you know it!"

The manager's gesture was noncommittal. Without admitting it, he could not help agreeing with his visitor.

"That's where I come in," Jimmy proceeded, his confidence growing. "I've got a hunch I can solve this Lead Pencil Willy mystery. I'll give you my dope right now. You take me on, and when he hits Seattle I'm liable to save you a bunch of money."

At the moment, Lead Pencil Willy was the most noted and most elusive criminal on the Pacific Coast. From San Diego to Sitka he was wanted on a hundred different charges. His exploits varied as to time and place, but were almost identical in method. He was one of those freak criminals who become prominent every decade or so—the aristocrats of crime, who originate and perfect their own unique methods, who take an inordinate pride in every successful job accomplished, and who gloat loudly and sardonically at their bewildered pursuers after each successive escape.

Lead Pencil Willy's methods were daring but simple. He got into the homes of the wealthy, the merely comfortable, and the poor—how, nobody ever found out, for he never left any evidence of his entrance or his exit—and abstracted whatever valuables happened to be there. His affairs were never marked by violence to human life—possibly not because of any restraint on the burglar's part, but because he was sufficiently clever to avoid being seen or heard at his work.

And in order that he might receive proper credit for his skill, in each case he left a sarcastic but illiterate note, with a lead pencil stuck through the paper, as a sort of trademark, so that no one might remain in doubt as to his handiwork.

Lead Pencil Willy was operating in Portland at the time when Jimmy Martin presented himself at the Seattle branch of the Globe Protective Association. Previously, Jimmy had been scaling logs in the Duke's Spur Lumber Company's camp on the slope of Mount Rainier. Then, while in Seattle on a holiday, he had become engaged to Alice Bailey. Lumbering didn't sound so well after that. What Jimmy wanted was something a little less low-brow, something

with more of a future, and, above all, something that would keep him in Seattle.

The Lead Pencil Willy mystery had fascinated Jimmy. One evening, while he was talking to Alice most despondently about his lack of business prospects, which promised to delay their wedding indefinitely, he suddenly hit upon an idea that seemed like a possible explanation of these burglaries about which the whole Pacific Coast was speculating.

Jimmy told his theory to Alice. The next morning he told it to the Globe's manager. On the following Monday he went on the company's pay roll, praying in his heart that Lead Pencil Willy would come to Seattle soon.

## II

THE Parsons affair developed late on Thursday afternoon. Jimmy happened to be in the manager's office when the telephone call from old Jonathan Parsons came in. It *was* a Lead Pencil Willy burglary!

Jimmy sat there with his heart thumping wildly, while Gregg shot staccato questions over the wire and made a few penciled notations of the answers.

"Our man will come right up," he stated in conclusion. "Leave everything just as it is."

"Has he notified headquarters?" Jimmy put in eagerly. "Tell him not to, until I get there."

"Hasn't done a thing but phone us," said Gregg, as he hung up the receiver. "It's Lead Pencil Willy all right—at Jonathan Parsons's! Great Scott!" Gregg mopped his forehead, and gazed anxiously at his youthful adjuster. "I hope I'm not a fool to trust you with this, Martin," he added.

"You're not," said Jimmy, rising briskly to his feet. "I'll get right up there."

"Wait a minute," his boss commanded. "You've heard about old man Parsons?"

Jimmy had. He knew a good deal about Jonathan Parsons, just as practically every one did who lived in Seattle and read the newspapers.

Skinflint Parsons, as he was frequently called, was an aged bachelor, popularly supposed to be inordinately wealthy, who lived in a comparatively modest home on Queen Anne Hill. He was credited with being the meanest and most parsimonious man on the Pacific Coast. He was not a miser, but merely a maniac on economy. He would buy an automobile in the morning, and in

the afternoon he would deplore the fact that he could not sell his newspaper back to a newsboy after he had read it. He would spend a dollar in gasoline driving about town in search of a cigar store, in order that he might save ten cents on a box of cigars.

His fetish, in short, was the greatness of little things. He worshiped, not the almighty dollar, but the almighty penny.

All this Jimmy Martin knew. He knew also that if old Jonathan Parsons had been robbed by Lead Pencil Willy, it was likely to cost the Globe Protective Association a good deal of money. He was not surprised at Gregg's perturbation.

"Sure I know Skinflint Parsons," Jimmy answered. "Has he got much of a burglary policy?"

"Ten thousand dollars," Gregg answered dismally.

Jimmy whistled in dismay, but his heart beat exultantly. Ten thousand dollars! He *must* succeed on this case. His job would be made permanent. He would be famous all up and down the coast, for the Lead Pencil Willy robberies had the smartest of them guessing. His salary would be raised. Alice and he could—

"Sit down a minute," said Gregg. "Here's what he says."

## III

JIMMY MARTIN approached the residence of Jonathan Parsons, on Queen Anne Hill, with an outward show of a confidence that he was far from feeling. He had elected to play the part of superdetective if Lead Pencil Willy should come to Seattle. Lead Pencil Willy had arrived. The police had not yet been notified. He—Jimmy Martin—was first on the ground. It was up to him to make good.

He rang the front doorbell. Jonathan Parsons answered it promptly and in person. Jimmy had never seen old Mr. Parsons before, except at a distance. He found him small and wizen, with a stringy neck like a chicken, and beady little eyes that bored into one.

"You from the Globe people? Come right in."

The old man's voice was thin, raspy, and querulous. He turned and led the way into a dim living room. As he shuffled along the hall, Jimmy noted that he wore a shiny black silk coat, old trousers, and carpet slippers.

In the living room Jimmy sat down on

the chair that Mr. Parsons indicated. The room was gloomy in the twilight.

"How about turning on a little light?" Jimmy suggested.

He could see the old man hesitating, as if it hurt him to begin consuming electricity a moment before it was absolutely necessary. Then, grudgingly, Mr. Parsons switched on the center electrolier.

The room was an average room, Jimmy thought—nothing remarkable about it in any way, except its complete lack of everything that creates an atmosphere of home.

"Can I smoke?" Jimmy asked.

He saw that Mr. Parsons was waiting for him to take the initiative, and he was a little at a loss how to begin. He also saw a cigar projecting from the pocket of the old man's jacket. He eyed it for an instant, and then pulled a cigarette from his own pocket and lighted it.

"Tell me all about it," he said cheerfully.

"Nothing much to tell," said Jonathan Parsons. "I came downstairs this afternoon about four o'clock. Been home all day. Had lunch in the dining room about twelve. Never heard a sound in the house all afternoon. Found things just like they are now. Take a look around—I haven't touched a thing."

Jimmy rose to his feet with alacrity. The first thing he saw, lying on a little side table by the huge French windows, was an old half sheet of note paper, scrawled with penciled words, and with a miserable little stub of lead pencil stuck through it.

"That's the first thing I saw," said old man Parsons. "It was lying right there. Read it."

Jimmy picked it up, holding it carefully so that the pencil would not fall out. This is what he read:

Yous is too easy. Much obleiged. See yous again later.

#### LEAD PENCIL WILLY.

The words were so wretchedly scrawled that there was no character in the handwriting—a characteristic of most of the Lead Pencil Willy letters, Jimmy remembered. He laid the note back on the table without comment.

"What was stolen?" he asked.

Old Mr. Parsons drew a long sheet of paper from his pocket.

"I've got it all here—everything that's missing. Made the list while I was waiting for you."

Jimmy saw it was a long list—silverware, mostly—with the value set beside each item. At the bottom was the total—six thousand two hundred and four dollars.

Jimmy waved it aside.

"Let me look the place over first," he suggested.

All the stolen articles had been taken from the dining room and the butler's pantry. Jimmy made a tour of inspection of the entire lower floor of the house—living room, dining room, butler's pantry, and kitchen.

It was the chilly weather of late fall; every window on the floor was closed and locked on the inside. There were only three exterior doors—that to the front porch, the kitchen back door, and the one leading down into the cellar. All were locked on the inside; and, so far as Jimmy could determine, none had been tampered with.

"Everything was just like this?" he asked.

"Yes," said Mr. Parsons. "I don't see how he could have got in or out. You can't get up to the roof and down without a ladder. He certainly isn't in the house now. I've been all over it."

The living room and the kitchen were in excellent order, the dining room and the butler's pantry in thorough confusion. Drawers were pulled out, and their linen contents strewn about. A huge mahogany highboy in the dining room was stripped of the silver which, old Mr. Parsons explained, always stood upon it. In the butler's pantry the elaborate mahogany silver chest stood with its drawers open and empty. One or two heavy silver spoons lay on the floor, as if the intruder, in his haste, had neglected to gather them up. In both rooms there were stray articles of silver lying about, neglected either because of Lead Pencil Willy's lack of time, or because of his discrimination as to value.

A truly extraordinary number of heavy articles had been taken—in broad daylight, without noise, and with no determinable means of the intruder's entrance or exit. It was a typical Lead Pencil Willy job.

#### IV

THEY were back in the living room.

"Sit down," said Jimmy. "I've got a few questions to ask."

He rather thought he sounded like an experienced detective, though he was far from feeling like one.

Old Mr. Parsons sat down—a bit impatiently, Jimmy thought. Obviously he considered that he had done his part, and all he wanted now was to collect his insurance as speedily as possible.

"You don't live here alone?" Jimmy began.

"No," answered the old man. "Mrs. Briggs is my housekeeper."

He smiled at Jimmy, evidently trying to be as pleasant as he could about the whole affair.

"Was she home to-day?"

"Yes. She's home now. Finished up after lunch and went to her room on the third floor. Been sewing all afternoon. She's up there now."

"She knows about the robbery?"

Jimmy felt that this was a somewhat inane question, but he let it go.

"I brought her down as soon as I discovered it." Mr. Parsons waved his hand expressively. "Women are all fools. She went into hysterics—as if I blamed *her!* I didn't—she's been with me for nearly twenty-seven years."

Jimmy nodded.

"Everything was all right when she went upstairs after lunch?"

"Yes, certainly."

"What time was that?"

"Two o'clock—about."

"She didn't hear anything during the afternoon?"

"How could she?" demanded Mr. Parsons. "She was on the third floor. I could hear her sewing machine going. There wasn't a sound down here."

"Let me talk to her," said Jimmy, feeling more hopeless the further he progressed. "Ask her down, will you? Oh, just a minute," he added, as the old man went to the door. "How about headquarters? The police—have you phoned them yet?"

"The police? No, I haven't. Why should I? All I want is my insurance—some of the money back that I've been wasting all my life. This darned thing is trouble enough without calling in the police. Publicity—rotten newspaper trash—I've had enough of that in my life! Police—bah!"

He spoke with such vehemence that Jimmy laughed.

"All right—don't get excited; but when I've got through, we'll have to call them, you know. They'll want to get after Lead Pencil Willy, even if you don't."

Jimmy's interview with the elderly Mrs. Briggs was entirely unproductive. She was almost incoherent with excitement and protestations of innocence. She had nothing to add to the facts as her employer had presented them, and Jimmy, convinced that she was speaking the truth, dismissed her as soon as possible.

"When do I get paid for the loss?" old Mr. Parsons demanded, when they were again alone.

"Sit down," said Jimmy. "Let's talk some more."

He hadn't the faintest idea what he could talk about, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to telephone to the police—to admit failure!

The Lead Pencil Willy note was still lying on the table beside him. He picked it up absently, and the little stub of pencil fell out and dropped to the floor. Old Mr. Parsons stooped and handed it back to him.

"Thanks," said Jimmy.

He took the pencil. It was hardly more than two inches long, but the last letters of the maker's name, and the grade—No. 3—still remained in silver letters.

Jimmy's eyes went to the few scrawled words that the robber had written; and then, with his heart thumping in his throat so that it almost choked him, an idea came. He saw daylight!

His first instinct was to smoke, in order to hide his excitement. The cigar was still projecting from the old man's upper coat pocket. Jimmy eyed it.

"Haven't got a cigar, have you?" he asked casually. "I just smoked my last cigarette."

Reluctantly, as if his soul was torn with anguish, old Mr. Parsons, still determined to be pleasant, handed over the cigar. There was a lead pencil projecting from the same pocket.

"Lend me that pencil too, will you?" Jimmy requested. "Don't want to use this one"—indicating Lead Pencil Willy's little stub. "It might be needed as evidence, you know."

He took the pencil. It was a long, new one, freshly sharpened. With total disregard for the sanctity of the Lead Pencil Willy note as evidence, Jimmy turned the paper over and scrawled a few words on its back with the borrowed pencil.

"Mr. Parsons!" he said. He tried to keep his voice level, but there was an exultant note in it, and his pugnacious jaw

was more pugnacious than ever. "We probably won't have to send for the police, after all—unless you insist. I've got the goods on you! You didn't have any burglary here. You're a faker, as nine out of ten, or maybe all, of these Lead Pencil Willy people are. I've got the goods on you, and you know it. I can see it in your face this minute. Are you going to own up and call it off, or do I phone for the police? I'll bet I can find your stolen stuff right here in this house!"

And old Mr. Parsons, taken wholly by surprise at this sudden outburst, confessed.

V

"You see it was this way," said Jimmy later, explaining it to Alice Bailey. "That Lead Pencil Willy note was written with a soft pencil—a No. 1. The little stub that Parsons had stuck in it was a hard pencil—a No. 3. The one he had in his pocket was a soft one—that was what he wrote the note with."

"But why," asked Alice, "when he wrote the note, didn't he use the same pencil to stick in the paper? That was what anybody would do."

"Yes," said Jimmy, "any ordinary person would, but not Skinflint Parsons. That's what queered his game—his own meanness. He figured it was no use to waste a new lead pencil when a little stub would do just as well; so right at the last

minute he put the new one back in his pocket, and hunted up that miserable little stub to stick in the paper. He overlooked the difference in the lead. Poor economy, I'd call it!"

The complete verification of Jimmy's theories in regard to the Lead Pencil Willy burglaries came nearly a week later, in the form of a letter addressed to Jimmy Martin, in care of the Globe Protective Association, Seattle. The affair on Queen Anne Hill had leaked out and had got into the newspapers, in spite of the fact that the Globe Company preferred no charges against old Mr. Parsons. Jimmy received, in addition to a permanent job and an increased salary, newspaper praise that pleased Alice immensely.

The letter in question was postmarked "San Francisco." It was entirely written in lead pencil, even to the address on the envelope. It read:

DEAR SIR:

This here West Coast publicks a bunch a crooks. I'm ritin to thank you for what you done. I pulled off two jobs in Frisco an one in Sitka an two in Portland an thats all, selp me. Just because I was good all these here crooks with burglary assurance gets to stealing there own stuff an blaming me. It aint right. When a guys clever enough to dope out something good nobody wont never let him have it in peace. It ain't right. Much obleiged for what you done.

Respeckfly,

LEAD PENCIL WILLY.

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THE WISDOM OF SHAKESPEARE

GRAVE *Hamlet* is not always prince—  
Perchance he plays the clown;  
A wink, in Shakespeare's day and since,  
May dissipate a frown.

Poor *Caliban* is not all beast—  
Sometimes he seems a sage;  
The greatest of us and the least  
May double on life's stage.

*King Lear* lives long and then goes mad,  
While *Romeo* dies young;  
How strange is human fate, how sad,  
When by the poet sung!

From *Cæsar* mighty truths we learn—  
From *Dromio* as well;  
To Shakespeare would that men might turn,  
And on his wisdom dwell!

Harold Seton