

Average Jones

by SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS

The MILLION-DOLLAR DOG

To this day, Average Jones maintains that he felt a distinct thrill at first sight of the advertisement. Yet fate might well have chosen a more appropriate ambush in anyone of a hundred of the strange clippings which were grist to the Ad-Visor's mill. Out of a bulky pile of the day's paragraphs, however, it was this one that leaped, significant, to his eye:

WANTED—TEN THOUSAND LOATHLY black beetles, by a leaseholder who contracted to leave a house in the same condition as he found it. Ackroyd, 199 W. Sixteenth St., New York.

"Black beetles, eh?" observed Average Jones. "This Ackroyd person seems to be a merry little jester. Well, I'm feeling rather jocular, myself, this morning. How does one collect black beetles, I wonder? When in doubt, inquire of the resourceful Simpson."

He pressed a button and his confidential clerk entered.

"Good morning, Simpson," said Average Jones. "Are you acquainted with that shy but pervasive animal, the domestic black beetle?"

"Yes, sir; I board," Simpson simply. "I suppose there aren't ten thousand black beetles in your boarding house, though?" inquired Average Jones.

Simpson took it under advisement. "Hardly," he decided.

"I've got to have 'em to fill an order. At least, I've got to have an installment of 'em, and tomorrow."

"Ramson, down on Fulton street, will have them, if anyone has," Simpson said presently.

Returning to his routine work, Average Jones found himself unable to dislodge the advertisement from his mind. So presently he gave way to temptation, called up Bertram at the Cosmic club, and asked him to come to the Astor Court temple offices at his convenience. Scouting more adventure, Bertram found it convenient to come promptly. Average Jones handed him the clipping. Bertram read it with ascending eyebrows.

"What's at one Hundred West Sixteenth street?" demanded Jones.

"One Hundred West Sixteenth; let me see. Why, of course; it's the old Feltner mansion. You must know it. It has a walled garden at the side; the only one left in the city, south of Central Park."

"Anyone named Ackroyd there?"

"That must be Hawley Ackroyd. I remember, now, hearing that he had rented it. Judge Ackroyd, you know, better known as 'Oily' Ackroyd. He's a smooth old rascal."

"Ever hear of his collecting insects?"

"Never heard of his collecting anything but graft. In fact, he'd have been in jail years ago, but for his family connections. He married a Van Haltern. You remember the famous Van Haltern will case, surely; the million-dollar dog. The papers fairly reeked of it a year ago. Sylvia Graham had to take the dog and leave the country to escape the notoriety. She's back now, I believe."

"I've heard of Miss Graham," remarked Average Jones.

"Well, if you've only heard of her and not seen her," returned Bertram, with something as nearly resembling enthusiasm as his habitual languor permitted, "you've got something to look forward to. Sylvia Graham is a distinct asset to the Scheme of Creation."

"An asset with assets of her own, I believe," said Average Jones. "The million dollars left by her grandmother, old Mrs. Van Haltern, goes to her eventually, doesn't it?"

"Provided she carries out the terms of the will, keeps the dog in proper luxury and buries him in the grave on the family estate at Schuykill designated by the testator. If these terms are not rigidly carried out, the fortune is to be divided, most of it going to Mrs. Hawley Ackroyd, which would mean the judge himself."

"H'm. What about Mrs. Ackroyd?"

"Poor, sickly, frightened lady! She's very fond of Sylvia Graham, who is her niece. But she's completely dominated by her husband."

"Information is your long suit, Bert. Now, if you only had intelligence to correspond—" Average Jones broke off and grinned mildly, first at his friend, then at the advertisement.

Bertram caught up the paper and studied it. "Well, what does it mean?" he demanded.

"It means that Ackroyd, being about to give up his rented house, intends to saddle it with a bad name."

"It would be just like Oily Ackroyd," remarked Bertram. "He's a vindictive scoundrel. Only a few days ago, he nearly killed a poor devil of a drug clerk, over some trifling dispute."

He managed to keep it out of the newspapers but he had to pay a stiff fine."

"That might be worth looking up, too," ruminated Average Jones thoughtfully.

He turned to his telephone in answer to a ring. "All right, come in, Simpson," he said.

The confidential clerk appeared. "Ramson says that regular black beetles are out of season, sir," he reported. "But he can send to the country and dig up plenty of red-and-black ones."

"That will do," returned the Ad-Visor. "Tell him to have two or three hundred here tomorrow morning."

Thus it was that, on the morning after this dialogue, a clean-built young fellow walked along West Sixteenth street. He was rather shabby-looking. On the evidence of the bandbox which he carried, his mission should have been menial; but he bore himself wholly unlike one subdued to petty employments. His steady, gray eyes showed a glint of anticipation as he turned in at the gate of the high, broad, brown house standing back, aloof and indignant, from the roaring encroachments of trade. He set his burden down and pulled the bell.

The door opened promptly to the deep, far-away clangor. A flashing impression of girlish freshness, vigor, and grace was disclosed to the caller against a background of interior gloom. The girl glanced not at him, but at the box, and spoke a trifle impatiently.

"If it's my hat, it's very late."

"It isn't, miss. It's the insects."

"The what?"

"The bugs, miss."

He extracted from his pocket a slip of paper, looked from it to the numbered door, as one verifying an address, and handed it to her.

"From yesterday's copy of the Banner, miss. You're not going back on that, surely," he said somewhat reproachfully.

She read, and as she read her eyes widened to lakes of limpid brown. Then they crinkled at the corners, and her laugh arose from the mid-tone contralto, to a high, birdlike trill of joyousness.

"It must have been uncle," she gasped finally. "He said he'd be quits with the real estate agent before he left. How perfectly absurd! And are those the creatures in that box?"

"The first couple of hundred of 'em, Miss Ackroyd."

The girl looked at him with suspicion, but his face was blankly innocent.

"I'm not Miss Ackroyd," she began with emphasis, when a querulous voice from an inner room called out: "Whom are you talking to, Sylvia?"

"A young man with a boxful of beetles," returned the girl.

Average Jones mutely held up the box in one hand and the advertisement in the other.

"Very well," said the girl, in demure tones, though lambent mirth still flickered, golden, in the depths of the brown eyes. "If you persist, I can only suggest that you come back when Judge Ackroyd is here. You won't find him particularly amenable to humor, particularly when perpetrated by a practical joker in masquerade."

"Discovered," murmured Average Jones.

"I don't ask any real reason for your extraordinary call," pursued the girl with a glint of mischief in her eyes, "but auntie thinks you've come to steal my dog. She thinks that of everyone lately."

"Auntie? Your dog? Then you're Sylvia Graham. I might have known it."

"I don't know how you might have known it. But I am Sylvia Graham—if you insist on introducing me to yourself."

"Miss Graham," said the visitor promptly and gravely, "let me present A. V. R. E. Jones, a friend—"

"Not the famous Average Jones!" cried the girl. "That is why your face seemed so familiar. I've seen your picture at Edna Hale's. You got her 'blue fires' back for her. But really, that hardly explains your being here, in this way, you know."

"Nothing simpler. Once upon a time there lived a crack-brained young Don Quixote who wandered through an age of buried romance piously searching for trouble. And, twice upon a time, there dwelt in an enchanted stone castle in West Sixteenth street an enchanting young damsel in distress—"

"I'm not a damsel in distress," interrupted Miss Graham, passing over the adjective.

The young man leaned to her. The half smile had passed from his lips, and his eyes were very grave.

"Not—if your dog were to—er—disappear?" he drawled quizzically.

The swift unexpectedness of the counter broke down the girl's guard.

"You mean Uncle Hawley," she said.

"And your suspicions jump with mine."

"What do you know about Uncle Hawley?"

"Your aunt—"

"I won't hear a word against my aunt."

"Not from me, be assured. Your aunt, so you have just told me, believes that your dog is in danger of being stolen. Why? Because she knows that the person most interested has been scheming against the animal, and yet she is afraid to warn you openly. Doesn't that indicate who it is?"

"Mr. Jones, I've no right even to let you talk like this to me. Have you anything definite against Judge Ackroyd?"

"In this case, only suspicion."

Her head went up. "Then I think there is nothing more to be said."

The young man flushed, but his voice was steady as he returned: "I disagree with you. And I beg you to cut short your visit here, and return to your home at once."

In spite of herself the girl was shaken by his persistence.

"I can't do that," she said uneasily. And added, with a flash of anger, "I think you had better leave this house."

"If I leave this house now I may never have a chance to see you again."

The girl regarded him with level, noncommittal eyes.

"And I have every intention of seeing you again—and again—and again. Give me a chance; a moment."

Average Jones' mind was of the emergency type. It summoned to its aid, without effort of cerebration on the part of its owner, whatever was most needed at the moment. Now it came to his rescue with the memory of Judge Ackroyd's encounter with Bertram.

"Miss Graham, I've gone rather far, I'll admit," said Jones; "but, if you'll give me the benefit of the doubt, I think I can show you some basis to work on. If I can produce something tangible, may I come back this afternoon? I'll promise not to come unless I have good reason."

Somewhat to her surprise and uneasiness, Sylvia Graham experienced a distinct satisfaction when, late that afternoon, she beheld her unconventional acquaintance mounting the steps with a buoyant and assured step. Upon being admitted, he went promptly to the point.

"I've got it."

"Your justification for coming back?" she asked.

"Exactly. Have you heard anything of some trouble in which Judge Ackroyd was involved last week?"

"Uncle has a very violent temper," admitted the girl evasively. "But I don't see what—"

"Pardon me. You will see. That row with a drug clerk."

"Well?"

"The drug clerk insisted—as the law requires—on Judge Ackroyd registering for a certain purchase."

"Perhaps he was impertinent about it."

"Possibly. The point is that the prospective purchase was cyanide of potassium, a deadly and instantaneous poison."

"Are you sure?" asked the girl, in a low voice.

"I've just come from the store. How long have you been here at your uncle's?"

"A week."

"Then just about the time of your coming with the dog, your uncle undertook to obtain a swift and sure poison. Have I gone far enough?"

"I—I don't know."

"What is your uncle's attitude toward the dog?"

"Almost what you might call ingratiating. But Peter Paul—that's my dog's name, you know—doesn't take to uncle."

"He's a wise old doggie," amended the other with emphasis. "When does your uncle give up this house?"

"At the end of the week. Uncle and aunt leave for Europe."

"Then let me suggest again that you and Peter Paul go at once."

Miss Graham pondered. "No, I can't do that."

"Now, Miss Graham, would it grieve you very much if Peter Paul were to die?"

"I won't have him put to death," said she quickly.

"Miss Graham," he said slowly, "won't you try to forget, for the moment, the circumstances of our meeting, and think of me only as a friend of your friends who is very honestly eager to be a friend to you, when you most need one?"

The girl's gaze met the man's level, and was held in a long, silent regard.

"Yes," she said simply.

"Listen, then. I think I see a clear way. Judge Ackroyd will kill the dog if he can, and so effectually conceal the body that no funeral can be held over it, thereby rendering your grandmother's bequest to you void. He has only a few days to do it in, but I don't think that all your watchfulness can restrain him. Now, on the other hand, if the dog should die a natural death and be buried, he can still contest the will. But if he should kill Peter Paul and hide the body where we could discover it, the game would be up for him, as he then wouldn't even dare to come into court with a contest. Do you follow me?"

"Yes. But you wouldn't ask me to be a party to any such thing."

"You're a party, involuntarily, by remaining here. But do your best to save Peter Paul, if you will. And please call me up immediately at the Cosmic club, if anything turns up. And, by the way, my beetles. I forgot and left them here. Oh, there's the box. I may have a very specific use for them later. Au revoir—and may it be soon!"

The two days succeeding seemed to Average Jones, haunted as he was by an importunate craving to look again into Miss Graham's limpid and changeable eyes, a dull and sodden period of probation. The messenger boy who finally brought her expected note, looked to him like a Greek godling. The note inclosed this clipping:

LOST—PUG DOG ANSWERING TO the name of Peter Paul. Very old and asthmatic. Last seen on West Sixteenth street. Liberal reward for information to Anxious. Care of Banner office.

"Dear Mr. Jones (she had written): 'Are you a prophet?' (Average Jones chuckled at this point.) The inclosed seems to be distinctly in our line. Could you come some time this afternoon? I'm puzzled and a little anxious.

Sincerely yours,
SYLVIA GRAHAM."

Average Jones could, and did. He found Miss Graham's piquant face under the stress of excitement, distinctly more alluring than before.

"Isn't it strange?" she said, holding out a hand in welcome. "Why should anyone advertise for my Peter Paul? He isn't lost."

"I am glad to hear that," said the caller gravely.

"Do you know what that advertisement means?"

"Perfectly. I wrote it."

"Wrote it! You? Well—really! Why in the world did you write it?"

"Because of an unconquerable longing to see"—Average Jones paused, and his quick glance caught the storm signal in her eyes—"your uncle," he concluded calmly.

She rang the bell, dispatched a servant, and presently Judge Ackroyd stalked into the room.

"What is the market quotation on beetles, judge?" asked the young man, tapping the rug with his stick.

"What are you talking about?" demanded the other, drawing down his heavy brows.

"The black beetle; the humble but brisk haunter of household crevices," explained Average Jones. "You advertised for ten thousand specimens. I've got a few thousand I'd like to dispose of, if the inducements are sufficient."

"I'm in no mood for joking, young man," retorted the other, rising.

"You seldom are, I understand," replied Average Jones blandly. "Well, if you won't talk about bugs, let's talk about dogs."

"The topic does not interest me, sir," retorted the other, and the glance of his eye was baleful, but uneasy.

The tapping of the young man's cane ceased. He looked up into his host's glowering face with a serene and innocent smile.

"Not even if it—er—touched upon a device for guarding the street corners in case—er—Peter Paul went walking—er—once too often?"

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"Well?"

She clung in his mind like a remembered fragrance, after he had gone back to Astor Court temple to wait.

Nor had he banished them, when, two days later, the telephone brought him her clear accents, a little tremulous now.

"Peter Paul is gone."

"Since when?"

"Since ten this morning. The house is in an uproar."

"I'll be up in half an hour at the latest. Let me in at the basement door at half-past one. Judge Ackroyd mustn't see me."

It was a strangely mishapen presentation of the normally spick-and-span Average Jones that gently rang the basement bell of the old house at the specified hour. All his pockets bulged with lumpy angles. Immediately, upon being admitted by Miss Graham herself, he proceeded to disemburden himself of box after box, such as elastic bands come in, all exhibiting a homogenous peculiarity, a hole at one end thinly covered with a gelatinous substance.

"Be very careful not to let that get broken," he instructed the mystified girl. "In the course of an hour or so it will melt away itself. Did you see anything suspicious in the garden?"

"No!" replied the girl. She picked up one of the boxes. "How odd!" she cried. "Why, there's something in it that's alive!"

"Very much so. Your friends, the beetles, in fact. Where is your uncle?"

"Upstairs in his study."

"Do you think you could take me all through the house sometime this afternoon without his seeing me?"

"No, I'm sure I couldn't. He's been wandering like an uneasy spirit since Peter Paul disappeared. And he won't go out, because he is packing."

"So much the worse, either for him or me. Where are your rooms?"

"On the second floor."

"Very well. Now, I want one of



"It's the insects."

Judge Ackroyd took one step forward. Average Jones was on his feet instantly, and, even in her alarm, Sylvia Graham noticed how swiftly and naturally his whole form "set."

But the big man turned away, and abruptly left the room.

"You spoke of having someone guard the corners of the block," remarked the girl, after a thoughtful silence. "Do you think I'd better arrange for that?"

"No indeed. There'll be a hundred people on watch."

He handed her a gaily proof marked with many corrections. She ran through it with growing amazement.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"I'll take a cigar, thank you very much," said Average Jones innocently. "You'll take your leave, or state your business."

"It has to do with your niece."

"Then what do you take my time for, damn your impudence?"

"Don't swear." Average Jones was deliberately provoking the older man to an outbreak. "Let's—er—sit down and—er—be chatty."

The drawl, actually an evidence of excitement, had all the effect of studied insolence. Judge Ackroyd's big frame shook.

"I'm going to k-k-kick you out into the street, you young p-p-p-pup," he stammered in his rage.

His knotted fingers writhed out for a hold on the other's collar. With a sinuous movement, the visitor swerved aside and struck the other man, flat-handed, across the face. There was an answering howl of demonic fury. Then a strange thing happened. The assailant turned and fled, not to the ready egress of the front door, but down the dark stairway to the basement. The judge thundered after, in maddened, unthinking pursuit. Average Jones ran fleetly and easily. And his running was not for the purpose of flight alone, for as he sped through the basement rooms, he kept casting swift glances from side to side, up and down the walls. Judge Ackroyd trailed his quarry like a bloodhound through every room of the third floor, and upward to the fourth.

The fourth floor of the old house was almost bare. In a hall-emburser hung a full-length mirror. All along the borders of this, Average Jones' quick-ranging vision had discerned small red-banded objects which moved and shifted. As the glass reflected his extended figure, it showed, almost at the same instant, the cutstretched, bony hand of "Oily" Ackroyd. With a snarl, half rage, half satisfaction, the pursuer hurled himself forward—and fell, with a plunge that rattled the

house's old bones. Before the falter man could gather his shaken wits, he was pinned with the most disabling grip known in the science of combat a strangle hold with the assailant's wrist clamped below and behind the ear. Average Jones lifted his voice and the name that came to his lips was the name that had lurked subconsciously, in his heart, for days.

"Sylvia!" he cried. "The fourth floor! Come!"

"The mirror," said Average Jones. "Push it aside. Pull it down."

With an effort of nervous strength the girl lifted aside the big glass. Behind it a hundred scarlet-banded insects swarmed and scampered.

"Unless my little detectives have deceived me," Jones said, "you'll find the body in there."

She groped, and drew forth a large box. In it was packed the body of Peter Paul. There was a cord about the fat neck.

"Strangled," whispered the girl. "Poor old doggie!" Then she whirled upon the prostrate man. "You murderer!" she said very low.

"It's not murder to put a dying brute out of the way," said the shaken man sullenly.

"But it's fraud, in this case," retorted Average Jones. "A fraud of which you're self-convicted. Get up."

"There was no more fight in Judge 'Oily' Ackroyd. He slunk to the stairs and limped heavily down to his frightened and sobbing wife."