

THE LETTER OF FEBRUARY 14th

AT the end of the shiny corridor there were two doors. One was marked "Sales Manager" and contained a typist. The other was not marked at all and contained a sales manager. The cunning idea was that Miss Griffiths intercepted all the useless callers who dropped into waste the valuable time of Mr Chester.

An interesting fellow, this Chester. It was whispered that he had four suits of clothes, which in a place like New Zealand is just being disgusting. And the people who worked for him said he was fiendishly efficient. You must know his type—not the sort of executive who sits at a glass-topped table and the only thing in front of him is a piece of blotter and a telephone, and who relies on everyone else to do the work. Oh, no, not Chester. His table was piled two feet high with mercantile debris with barely room for his arm to slide one signature-length sideways. "He'll be burnt out by the time he's forty," they said. "You can tell he's got ulcers now."

No one detested Chester more than Miss Griffiths did. But she never admitted it. Confidential secretaries are like that. You were very careful what you said about Chester in front of Miss Griffiths. She would defend him to the last ditch. But deep down in Miss Griffiths's heart she knew there was a day coming when she could bear him no longer, when she would suddenly rise up and push his tiny head into the pencil sharpener and grind away until his skull lay in a heap of small chips in that transparent part you have to empty every now and again.

There was a hatch in the wall between her room and his, and work was passed to and fro through it, usually without a word. Miss Griffiths used the hatch as a means of expression: when she slammed the slide shut with a report like a rifle-shot Chester would know she was angry. That's if he heard it.

This morning his face appeared in the hatch, framed there like the portrait of an impatient sitter.

"I want the letter from Sampsons of February the 14th about the revised prices of the 'City of Manchester' shipment."

That was the way he spoke. Miss Griffiths said nothing. That was the way she answered him. But she leaned back in her chair and opened the door behind her leading into the main office. "Miss Purcell, letter from Sampsons, February the 14th, about revised prices, please."

The girl at the filing cabinet looked up with a jerk.

"Sampsons what?"

"Just find their letter of February 14th. It'll be the right one."

Miss Purcell took out the S-file. There was always a trace of apprehension in her face when she began to look for a letter because she knew the strangest things happen to letters in a filing system. Miss Griffiths, tilting back in her chair, watched the girl rifle uneasily through the file, stop, go through it a second time, then alarmed, flip through it a third time. Presently she looked up.

"That's funny."

Miss Griffiths had heard that expression before. She came out of her room, careful to close the door so that Chester wouldn't hear the ensuing conversation.

"It won't be very funny if you can't find it," she remarked. "It's important."

"But it's not here."

"Who had it last?"

"How do I know? They just come and take them," bleated Miss Purcell.



"No one detested Chester more than Miss Griffiths did"

Then she added as a horrible afterthought, "Would it be filed under something else?"

"If it is, you did it," snapped Miss Griffiths.

"Oh, really?" This was enough for Miss Purcell. Even filing clerks have some self-respect.

The two girls stood facing each other, blood pressures matched. Every typewriter, every adding machine in the office stopped. Everyone waited expectantly for more. But it didn't come. Miss Griffiths had bitten her lip.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it. But no wonder I get annoyed. I'm the one who always stops Chester's snarl." Then she turned away wearily and muttered, "Of all the letters in the office—that one." In a moment she added more rationally, "It must be somewhere."

The pair of them separated, going from desk to desk. Miss Griffiths stopped first at Mr Foster's.

"I haven't got it," he said impatiently. There's one like Foster in every office. They fend off everybody. They give you the impression they are shielding heavy defalcations of the firm's cash.

"You're the costing clerk, aren't you?" snapped Miss Griffiths. "You're the one most likely to have it."

"As far as I'm concerned, Miss Griffiths, the letter is filed. What's Miss Purcell done with it?"

"Miss Purcell hasn't got it," retorted Miss Griffiths, now ready to defend Miss Purcell to the last bullet against a pig like Foster. She would have stayed glaring at him much longer, but out of the corner of her eye she saw someone laughing at her. It was Mr Elders.

"What is it, Bid?" he said. "Don't tell me you've lost a letter out of the filing system!"

"The letter from Sampsons about the revised prices—of all the letters, that one."

"Tried the stationery cupboard?" asked Elders.

"Oh, shut up, Dick, this is serious. Chester wants it."

Elders got up slowly from his desk and moved over to Foster's, and without as much as a beg-pardon began

going through the correspondence on Foster's desk. Foster's eyes blazed.

"What the—"

"Just looking for a letter."

"I've been accused of that once already," said Foster. "Put that stuff down."

"All right," said Elders genially, finishing the outward tray and starting on the inward. When he found nothing he remarked with pointed disappointment, "No, you haven't got it."

They looked in everyone's tray while everyone flatly denied having had anything to do with the confounded letter. Then the three of them, Elders, Miss Griffiths and Miss Purcell, rejoined each other at the filing cabinet like an unsuccessful rescue party returned to base.

"I don't know," sighed Miss Griffiths, "I honestly don't. You'd need to be clairvoyant to find anything in this office."

Mr Chester must have had a suspicion by now that she didn't know

either, because his door suddenly opened and he stood there facing the office.

"Miss Griffiths, I asked you for a letter from Sampsons dated February the 14th, about the revised prices of the 'City of Manchester' shipment."

A tingling silence settled on the room. Miss Griffiths cleared her throat. "It's lost," she said simply.

Mr Chester's eyelids narrowed just one millimetre. From all the riches of his mother tongue, the pageantry of its adjectives, the treasury of its verbs, all he could manage to utter was a sound like a tyre going down.

Then he came forward with menacing slowness.

He stopped at Foster's desk. "Mr Foster, have you seen it?"

Foster's reaction was the same as before, only a little more restrained.

"No, Mr Chester, I have not got the letter."

Chester turned to Elders. "You seen it, Mr Elders?"

"Oh, I've seen it all right," laughed Elders. "The trouble is, I haven't got it."

Chester moved up the room to the sales analysis clerk. He was being followed by Miss Griffiths and Miss Purcell like an adjutant and a sergeant-major following a camp commandant on a tour of inspection.

The sales analysis clerk couldn't even remember the letter.

Neither could the two comptometer girls. "We don't handle much correspondence, Mr Chester."

"Have you seen it?" Chester asked the cashier.

She shrugged, and added: "Wouldn't interest me, a letter like that."

The customs clerk was waiting with his "No, not me," even before Chester asked him the question.

Chester turned on his heel and faced them all.

"Remarkable," he breathed.

There was one thing left. He went over to the filing cabinet, followed still by his two depressed-looking aides. There he picked up the S-file and began slowly going through it, page by page. Miss Purcell felt a queer, sinking feeling as Chester came nearer and nearer to where the letter of February the 14th should be. It was a sickening presentiment that in a moment Chester was going to pause, gently remove a letter, then lift his eyes to hers in a gaze of resignation to things utterly beyond his understanding.

THE CASE OF THE STOLEN RAPHAEL

THE RAPHAEL RESURRECTION

is the play to be heard in Surf Radio Theatre on Saturday, June 15, from the ZBs, ZAs, and 1XH. A dramatization of the novel by Terry Newman, the setting in time is some two years after the Second World War. Two men, utterly opposed in character and temperament, combine in the search for one of the world's most famous paintings, an Italian masterpiece stolen by the Germans during the war. Walter Sullivan (right) and Guy Doleman play, respectively, Andrew Kerr, a struggling artist, and Talbot, an ex-army officer led on only by a selfish desire for easy money.

This coming Saturday—June 8—Surf Radio Theatre presents a Peter Cheyney thriller, *Dance Without Music*. It follows his usual formula: beautiful and dangerous women, hard-living private detective, and violent action. This time one fair and wealthy lady pays Caryl O'Hara to rid another fair lady of a blackmailer who is turning her into a drug addict. O'Hara meets the villain, violently, and the next night he is dead.



Needless to say, suspicion of murder and the necessary investigation mean romance as well to O'Hara.

N.Z. LISTENER, JUNE 7, 1957.