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## Fraud

by Sue Hitchcock

The facts, as they could be ascertained, were as follows. The package could not have been more ordinary – a bubble-wrap lined jiffy bag, A4 size. It was addressed to a D. Panayos in Phoenix, U.S.A. though D.I. Friend was only interested in items sent from the Demeter Print Gallery in Bond Street.

“Is this the only item?” he asked the sorting office supervisor.

“Yes, we only get a few items each month from them, but they are always registered delivery, so you can check the book.”

“I’d like to open the package, O.K?”

“Not on your life! You’d have to have a search warrant!”

D.I. Friend took out his phone and photographed front and back before leaving. In his car he checked the customs label, which said the contents, a print, was worth £50. He’d never get a search warrant based on the anonymous phone call he had received. Bond Street was close, so he left his car and walked to the gallery.

He was met inside by a young woman, beautiful but for a strange asymmetry to her face. In a plummy accent she welcomed him, handing him a price list.

The display was of photographs, mainly landscapes with the emphasis on shadows and clouds – not his taste, as if it mattered.

“Don’t you have other types of print?” he asked.

“We do, but you’d have to make an appointment with Mrs Lodwige-Cole, the owner.” And she sat down at her computer. “She could see you at two, if you want to buy something.”

“Charlie Friend” he offered, as she started to type, “Thanks!”

As he was leaving, another woman emerged, murmuring “Lunch break!” to the gallery assistant.

Outside Charlie said to her, “You’re not Mrs Lodwige-Cole, are you?”

“Good God, no!” she answered.

“Lunch?”

“O.K.”

They headed for a café. (Not too many pubs this side of Regents Street) and Charlie found out that Hedda was responsible for packing prints for dispatch. She was basically square – not the uncool kind – but broad-shouldered, square jawed and with expressive square hands, gesturing as she explained that she was a sculptor, but had to work for money to live on. She had hoped to pick up some clients, but patronage is hard won.

“How about you?” she asked.

Charlie hesitated, “I’m in the police.”

“Oh, did you get my call? Thank goodness!”

Hedda’s lunch hour was over, but between them they had planned he should ask to see some original prints.

Mrs Lodwige-Cole, even plummier than her assistant and wafting expensive perfume, welcomed him into what was a rather disappointing office. Apart from her desk and chair there was only a map chest, but that of course was the main focal point. She began unlocking each drawer.

“I don’t have much at the moment, we’ve had a lot of Americans buying while the exchange rate is good for them, but I can contact you if you have a special interest.”

“I suppose Picasso and Matisse are phenomenally expensive, but perhaps you have something a bit less famous?” Charlie suggested.

“Darling, you’d better see what we have.” She said, showing him some English prints from the twenties. The prices took him by surprise – he would have to bluff his way out. Where were the prints at £50 as shown on the parcel, he wondered?

“I’ll look in again. Maybe you’ll have something I can afford.” A touch of honesty might not go amiss.

When Charlie met Hedda that evening he showed her the photo of the package.

“I remember posting it. I noticed the customs label and that’s why I phoned. There should have been a couple more noughts on that figure.”

“So, is she having a bargain basement sale?”

“Oh no! She’s coining in the money, all right. It’s a scam I think. She’d claim it was only a reproduction she was sending, but we don’t sell reproductions.”

Next day D.I. Charlie Friend applied for a search warrant and when the sorting office contacted him again, he went with Hedda and the police Art Fraud expert to check the contents of the latest package. The print was not a reproduction, but an etching worth many times the declared amount. The scam was on the Dept. of Customs and Excise.