

## A Sign of the Times

by Martin Bourne

Ian Gilmour was flirting with the girl in reception. He always seemed to have plenty of time on his hands. It was 8.30am and I had been in the office since 7am. I was snowed under with emails and other correspondence. Gilmour sauntered in.

“The ole man wants to see you,” he said with a sickly smile.

“How do you know?”

“Becky told me.”

“Thanks for nothing. Now it looks like I’ve kept him waiting.”

He continued to smile as I left the room.

The guv’nor looked up as I entered his office.

“Where the hell have you been?”

I muttered my apologies.

“I’ve got a new claim for you and you’d better not balls it up.”

“That’s great, but couldn’t someone else do it? I’ve got so much on.”

“I can easily solve that for you. Let me get your P45 and I’ll find another loss adjuster. How does that sound?”

“No, no I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that...?”

“You let me worry about that. This claim is over in Chelsea. Someone has taken a dislike to an oil painting and it’s valued at thirty grand. Here’s the papers, get over there now.”

I went back to my desk and phoned the policyholder and arranged to visit him. The correspondence would have to wait.

The underground was crowded and full of bloody tourists jabbering away at each other in foreign tongues. An hour later I arrived at an imposing cream painted house behind sturdy gates.

At the door I was met by the owner Mr Lou Perlman. He was affable and despite his obvious wealth he was down to earth and chatty. I told him I needed to write down the circumstances of what had happened and he explained that he and his wife had been out during the evening and when they returned they discovered a burglary. Jewellery had been stolen and the painting slashed.

“I wasn’t aware jewellery had been taken?” I said.

“That’s not a problem, it has already been returned. It is just the painting.”

“But how could you have recovered the jewellery. The break-in only occurred last night?”

“I can always find things and people when I need to, so let’s confine this to the painting shall we,” he said menacingly.

I turned my attention to the slashed painting to avoid the awkward feeling.

“It looks badly damaged,” I said, “what is the title?”

“It’s called ‘A Sign of the Times’, painted 150 years ago by some Italian. It’s not repairable, I’ve already had a conservator look at it.”

“That was quick. How did you get....?” I stopped talking remembering what he had said before.

He passed me his phone so that I could read the conservator’s report, which had been emailed that morning. It read...

*Dear Mr Perlman*

*We refer to our inspection of your oil painting ‘A Sign of the Times’ by Giacometti. We confirm that in our opinion this painting is beyond economic repair.*

I scrolled down

*Our expert also found that the canvas is a modern type. We believe therefore that the painting is a copy and has a value of no more than £200.*

“Oh dear, what do you want to do about that?”

“About what?” he shot back.

“About what the conservator has said.”

He read the full report and his face became flushed.

“That lying fucker,” he shouted, “he gave me that painting to repay a debt. Told me it was valuable.”

“Who did and how much was the debt?”

“It’s not important.”

“Well, look the insurance company won’t pay out now we know the painting is a forgery.”

Mr Perlman went over to a bureau and pulled out an envelope.

“Here take this,” he said and pushed the envelope inside my suit jacket.

“What is it?”

“£10,000. Now, you are going to report to the insurance company that this is a genuine claim and tell them to pay me £30,000.”

“Err, no, I don’t think. No, I, I can’t do that.”

“You can do it and you will do it, or you can go and join the two men in the garage who tried to rob me.”

“But you don’t understand,” I said, “I can’t lie to the insurance company.”

“Don’t test me. People who try, end up wishing they hadn’t.”

A large man entered the room and began walking towards me reaching inside his breast pocket.

“Okay, okay I’ll do it.”

“Good lad, you never know we might be able to help each other again sometime.”

“Can I just use your facilities before I leave, I’ve a weak bladder.”

He directed me to the toilet near the front door.

“Well, goodbye then,” I said as I hurried out the door.

“I expect to hear from the insurance company in, well let’s say two weeks.” His smile was pure evil as he noted the bulge in my jacket.

As soon as I was outside the gates, my pace broke into a run. I was convinced he would have a change of heart and send his henchman after me. I got back to the office and sat down at my desk to collect my thoughts. The guv'nor walked in.

"You're fired you fucking thief. Collect your stuff."

Gilmour displayed a delicious smirk.

I followed the boss out of the room and back to his office.

"Why are you getting rid of me?"

"You took the bribe didn't you. Come on hand over the envelope."

"I don't know how you know, but I didn't take it."

He picked up the phone and dialled.

"Hi George, he said he didn't take it. Oh he did, did he. Crafty bugger. Okay see you in about an hour."

He turned to me.

"So apparently you left the package in the WC. Well done, it was a test to see if I could trust you. Lou is actually George Solly and he is head of fraud at the insurance company. Come on we are going to meet him for a drink."

We stopped at my office. The guv'nor pushed the door open.

"Gilmour, all those files on his desk are yours now. Sort them out."

My turn to smirk.