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Forsyte's Retreat



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Sextus Rollo Forsyte had his trouble with the bottle, but nothing out of a bottle ever produced such a hotel as the Mahoney-Plaza: only 260 rooms ... only two guests to a room ... but accommodating 5200 guests – all at the same time!.. Floor please?

At last he was second in line. He squared his shoulders and pulled at the lower edges of his black double-breasted suitcoat to erase the travel wrinkles. The applicant ahead of him exploded the words, "Nuts! I'll leave town first. I just *came* from the Phony-Plaza. You can take that squirrel-cage and – "

"Next!" the employment agent called sadly. Sextus Rollo Forsyte moved up and sat in the oak chair before the oak desk and faced the oak-featured man with the jobs.

"Forsyte is the name," Sextus reminded. The man riffled through the application cards.

"Yes. Indeed. Lucky you came back. I have a fine position for you, Mr. Forsyte. Right in your line." He held out a blue slip. "The general manager's position is open at the Mahoney-Plaza. Six hundred a month, board and room. Now if you will..."

Sextus staggered from the employment office stunned.

He could handle the job, all right. As he'd said on the application form, in his forty years he had managed half a dozen large hotels. But they were handing him this plum without comment on his failure to fill in the spaces marked: COMPLETE REFERENCES (names and addresses).

He shrugged. They did a lot of things different in California. The most he had hoped for was a waiter's job or maybe a short order cook in a fry joint. But if they wanted to ignore the hotel associations' black list, he wouldn't argue.

Sextus Forsyte craved anonymity with the passion that most men seek fame and glory. Beneath his suave, mature exterior beat the shrinking heart of a perennial hermit whose delight was an adventure book and a bottle of whiskey.

His recent employer had not objected to his fondness for reading nor solitude, but his appetite for liquor had revealed itself in a series of unfortunate crises which plague the life of any hotel executive.

Yes, Sextus Forsyte had sought his solitude in that remotest of all places, the large city hotel. His career of smiling at strange faces, welcoming famous people and snapping crisp commands to assistant managers had provided the near-perfect isolation from normal society. To the transient eye he was the poised, gregarious greeter. Actually he lived in a deep well of introversion. Of course, this was no affair of the succession of boards of directors who had uttered the harsh charges of "dipsomania" and fired him. But then boards of directors are never notable for their sympathy or understanding.

And finally word got around the eastern seaboard about Sextus. "A competent man, yes. Drinks on the job. Wouldn't have him as a busboy."

Worse than the mere prospect of unemployment was the notoriety. Coldly sober, Sextus had fled panic-stricken to the west coast, vaguely determined to become a beach-comber or an oyster-fisherman or whatever they did out there.

He stared now at the blue slip and turned in to a florist shop. He broke his last five-dollar bill to buy a pink carnation for his buttonhole then headed down the sunny walk to the hotel. It was a fine December morning in the little beach town, such as only Florida and California can advertise. He breathed the salt air and turned an appreciative ear to the gentle wash of the Pacific surf. He felt so good he might even take a little breakfast before his first drink of whiskey of the day.

At the bus depot he traded his baggage checks for two old, but fine leather, two-suiters. Then he taxied the remaining two blocks to the Mahoney-Plaza.

He paused at the entrance, stepped from under the marquis and looked up mystified. The frontage indicated a rather small hostelry to pay such munificent salary to its general manager. Only five stories high, it was squeezed in by low office buildings on either side like an ancient, narrow-chested old man.

He handed his bags to a bell-hop and stepped into a spacious lobby. It was decorated with fine furniture, thick carpets and throngs of expensively undressed people.

The boy put his bags down before a remarkably long room-desk manned by three white-suited clerks, but Sextus touched his arm. "Just take them up to the manager's suite, please." The boy eyed him from carnation to dusty shoes.

"Right off a park bench. It figures, though." He got a key from the desk clerk, picked up the bags again and they started for the elevator alcove.

Sextus' practiced eye vacuumed details from the lobby, the well-swept carpets, freshly emptied sand-jars and the modern elevators. The place seemed well-ordered and enjoying convention-magnitude business.

He started into the first elevator, but the operator warned, "To Wing 'A' only!" with such a question in his voice that Sextus looked back for his bellman. That person, a sandy-haired stripling of some five-feet-four, was trying to wave him on with his head.

"Not that one," he said impatiently. "Over here. Wing 'H'." Then Sextus noticed there were five elevators on either side of the alcove. Each was plainly marked with a letter, running from "A" through "J". This was a new wrinkle. Elevators were a mode of strictly vertical transportation, meaning, as a safe generality, that they travelled in parallel routes. Why, then, differentiate for separate wings when they were all grouped together in the first place?

And, incidentally, why *ten* elevators for a 200 or so room hotel, anyway?

They rode to the fourth floor in one-level leaps, stopping to unload several guests on each floor. The upper floor hall was of modest length, running fore and aft of the long, narrow building, as he had first sized it up. Where were all the *wings*— the wings with the separate elevators?

The boy let him into the light, airy apartment, dropped his bags in the middle of the floor and started out abruptly. Sextus called him back.

"Yeah, what'll it be – Chief?" His voice was derisive.

"How many rooms do we have here, fellow?"

"Twenny-six hunnerd and all full for the season, so if you'll just leggo of me – "

"Don't you enjoy your work here?"

"I detest it. Go ahead, fire me, chum. I'm lookin' for an excuse to clear out."

"Very well, you have one. Check out with the captain." Sextus couldn't tolerate discourteous familiarity. Friendly familiarity was bad enough, but the "chum" did it.

The boy banged the door behind him.

Sextus opened his bag. From it he extracted a fifth of whiskey which he took to the tiled bathroom. He stripped the cellophane from a drinking glass, poured it half-full of the amber liquor and drained it.

He was in the shower when the phone rang. He dripped to the night stand with the patience of one who has soaked many a rug and discovered that they don't stain. "Forsyte here!" he answered.

"The new manager? Well, this is Jackson, bell-captain. Whadda you mean canning Jerry? I'm down to twelve skippers and you start out by firing one of my fastest boys!"

"The boy was sarcastic and insolent. Take it up with the service manager. Anyway, how many bellmen do you need to run this cracker-box? Twelve is about eight too many."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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