

Charlie

by Hamish Spiers

If Charlie were to be honest with himself, he would have to admit it had been a slow month. If he were to be completely honest, he would also have to admit that was understating things quite a bit. The month just past, along with the six months preceding it, had been a veritable dead period in his life.

Last October, he had worked a big case. His client had been the heiress of a wealthy industrialist and she had been more than generous in her terms. In fact, if it hadn't been for her, his little business would have gone under in time for New Year's, which would have been a great way to kick-start the proceedings.

However, that good fortune had only got him so far and now, the last of those funds were beginning to dry up. He was good, he knew that. He was good at what he did. It was just that right then, nobody needed him, aside from that... client.

That was the most charitable word Charlie could assign to the man who had come in last week. He didn't like him one bit, he had little doubt that his wife was cheating on him and he wouldn't blame her if she were. The man was a creep. However, he was a creep with money and as much as Charlie would have loved to turn him away, he needed money. So now he was on the case, looking for the evidence he needed to confirm the man's suspicions – and his own.

It was petty – Petty! – and right then, he hated himself. He leaned back in his booth and looked away from the woman across the diner for a moment. He looked at his plate and the half eaten piece of steak and the frothy remains of the stout beer in his glass. He wished he could have another one but he couldn't. He needed to stay sober. And he couldn't with the household budget as it was either. It was his wife who brought in what spending money they had now – and she worked hard for it. He wasn't going to waste it.

He looked back at the woman. She was still waiting for her rendezvous. He then looked out at the street. It was a dreary day and perhaps it was just as well. As he watched, the drizzle picked up a notch and he now decided he could call it proper rain and all. He could hear it through the glass and it splashed across the windows, making little rivulets that made it seem as though he were looking at the darkened street through a gentle waterfall.

He wished that was all he was doing. Watching his client's wife, knowing who she was when she'd never seen him before in her life... that was spying. And it wasn't the glamorous kind or even the respectable soul destroying kind you read about in Cold War novels. It was the lousy sell-out kind that placed him alongside such despicable characters as the litigation lawyers who seemed to fill up a fifth of the phone book these days.

The wealthy heiress from last October had brought him on to solve a blackmail case. It had taken all his efforts and a wealth of local knowledge that had taken him years of experience to accumulate. He'd received a bonus from his client, immense respect from the officers of the district police and the chief of the local precinct had come all the way to his office in person just to shake him by the hand.

No one would shake him by the hand for what he was doing now, except maybe his new client. And Charlie wouldn't let him.

The now familiar jingle of the little bell by the door intruded on his silent musings. Charlie didn't sit up suddenly but he paid attention to the little sounds that told him what was going on.

He couldn't see the door from where he was seated but if anyone coming into the place walked past him, they wouldn't be able to see him unless they sat down on the far side of any of the tables in the place – and that wouldn't be a problem for Charlie because the woman he was watching was already occupying that seat at her particular table. Whoever her rendezvous was, they'd be sitting across from her with their back turned to him. Charlie wondered whether this was the lady's secret companion now, the person who had just come into the place.

He heard no footsteps heading out, just one set of them heading in. Charlie relaxed slightly. The sounds were the sounds of high heels on the floor. If the woman was indeed meeting a man for a romantic interlude, then this wasn't him.

The newcomer passed his table.

Then Charlie froze up. He knew this woman. The woman didn't see him of course, and he didn't see her face either but he didn't need to. He saw her every day and he knew her from every angle and he could recognise her simply by her posture and the length of her stride. This was the woman that he was married to – and before his eyes, she sat across from the wife of his client. She was the rendezvous and, now Charlie knew, she had been the rendezvous all along.

He knew he would have to leave soon, before his wife turned around. She wouldn't mind the fact that he was there but now that he knew that his client's wife was a friend of his own, it changed everything about the case.

He finished his drink and began to move his cutlery but then he stopped. He had initially decided that he wouldn't listen in on the conversation but unconsciously he had started and then, quite consciously, he stayed still and listened to the rest of it.

"It sometimes feels as though he's given up," his wife said.

"I'm the same!" the other woman exclaimed. "I don't know what my husband's doing any more. He's stuck in some rut and I honestly don't know what to do about it. I mean, that's why I talk to you. Because I don't know who else to go to."

"That's all right. But it's that bad, is it?"

"It's getting worse. He's behaving really strangely too these days. It's like he's becoming more paranoid or something. He'd hate it if he knew I was talking to you about it."

"But you've got to tell someone about it. You can't let him control you."

"Oh, he doesn't control me but he's just becoming really weird. You know, he's withdrawn and paranoid. It's like he thinks the whole world's out to get him and all he can do now is just sit around the house complaining about this, that or the other thing and feeling sorry for himself."

"Well, if it's any consolation, my own husband's not much better."

Charlie began to feel quite anxious. It was his own wife who said the last words.

"But, he's got that business of his, doesn't he?" his client's wife asked.

"That detective business? That brought in a little money on the side for a while but it's hardly a long-term prospect. He hasn't had a client since last October."

"October?"

"Yeah," Charlie's wife said. "October. And nothing since then. I love him and all and I really would like to see him doing something that makes him happy but this dream of his is over. And he can't see it."

"So he's in a rut too?"

Charlie moved slightly in his seat. He knew he could sit there and hear all his character flaws and maybe he could use all those pointers to sort himself out... but somehow, he didn't think so.

He'd have to go home that evening to that woman, that wonderful partner of his, and pretend that he had heard none of that except the part that she loved him – and he'd know that, in no small way, the happy relationship that he had with his wife had been changed.

He couldn't be angry with her for not telling him any of those things – she didn't tell him because she didn't want to hurt his feelings – but he sure hated his client now. Of course, he had hated him already but now he felt the sensation so acutely, he could almost taste it... and it had ruined his lunch.

Quietly, Charlie stood up, settled the bill and left.