

The Giant has Fleas

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By Carroll John Daly

It was a detective's stubbornness that made big Joe Fenton, racketeer, and it was a detective's stubbornness that broke him.

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The big man lounged back in his chair and slowly lifted his feet to the smooth surface of the large desk. He took the cigar out of his mouth and shook the ashes deliberately onto the softness of the thick rug. Then he said to Detective Eddie Blair:

"The trouble with you, Ed, is that you always have a plan. You observe so much, you study so much, you exercise so much, and damned if you don't even go listen to lectures. You miss the main point in life—you can use yourself only so far. You must learn to use others."

"Like the Gavin girl you killed?" Detective Blair asked, without rancor or vindictiveness.

The big man put the cigar back into his mouth and studied Blair. There wasn't quite two years difference in their ages and yet he might have been ten, fifteen years older than the detective.

"Let us," he said, "for the point of argument, admit all the things you think you know about me to be true." And with a smile: "From your own list, that is plenty. But it only establishes my point. You have too much personal knowledge. And knowledge, as you know, is not evidence, and personal knowledge is not even knowledge." The big man licked his lips on that one. He liked the sound of it. "I used to hate you, Ed, until I got thinking that probably I owe you everything I have in life." And with a grin: "And so does the Gavin girl, for that matter."

"And Ben Fitzgerald and old Jacob Swartz and—"

"Yes, yes," the big man cut in. "All those things in your head, live men that you think I made or had made dead. Big, dishonest businessmen and small, honest businessmen that I broke. But that is only one side of it. There's Alderman Johnson who wouldn't be an alderman if it wasn't for you, and Graham Hubert

Holland—” And, after a pause: “I’m fixing him for senator. He doesn’t know it, but it all came through you.”

“Let me have it, Joe.” The detective tried not to look puzzled.

“Joseph,” the big man corrected gently. “Joseph R. Fenton. I’m moving along, Ed, and one has to destroy a few weeds if he wants a prosperous garden. This debt of gratitude. It started when we were kids. You always got better marks in school than I did. You despised me because I was—well, I used to think it was envy because I got money from rolling drunks in the park or snatching a purse now and then. Later I discovered it was a deep, honest streak in you. I didn’t like you being superior, Ed; so I set out to get the best of you. I remember spending money on a little fat girl whose name I’ve forgotten, but she gave me her homework. Then there was Ruben something or other, the little Polish boy who knew it all. I copied from him in the examinations. He didn’t like it, but it was that or a beating.” Joseph R. Fenton smiled reminiscently. “Physically, well, you studied boxing and judo and trained at a gym. We had our test of strength, though, one night behind Callahan’s saloon. Remember?”

“Yes.” Ed Blair’s lips set a little. “You stuck a knife in my back when I had you down.”

“That’s right. I got up and you didn’t. I felt mean enough to kill you that night, Ed. But I didn’t and I’m glad of it. I went into the life I knew. The easy money, the painted dolls and heavy liquor. You went on the force and came back to the old neighborhood in the shadow of the bridge. The boys said you hounded me, Ed. Maybe you did. You were smart. So again I had to be smarter. You made me realize that the painted dolls and heavy liquor were your allies, not mine. I was on my toes and now—” He waved his hand. “If the walls weren’t so thick, Ed, you could hear the falling of the dice, the spinning of the roulette wheel, the click of the chips. Most of it tax free money, Ed. And downstairs a name band, the popping corks, the drunken laughter of the rich. For nearly two years now you’ve honored me, Ed. Spurred me on.” He took his feet from the desk and said, “Say the word and I’ll slip you ten grand. I took close to half a million bucks out of this joint alone last year. And most of it I owe to the old feeling of superiority over you. To you. Damn it, Ed, I mean it. You hate me, but you’ve been good for me.”

Eddie Blair spoke slowly.

“So you’re going to run that crook Johnson for the senate.”

“I’m going to make him senator. I could use you, too, Ed. You’ve got traits I like. I like loyalty and honesty; that is, honest dealing with me. But that stubborn streak you call honesty don’t sit so well. It’s a touch of conscience. That’s a weakness in you, and it would be a downright danger to me.”

“And you want me to think that I’m practically responsible for your life of crime?”

“My success, yes. I give you credit for that, Ed. And I’m willing to back up that credit with ten grand cash, now, on the line, tax free money. No one to know you ever received it. You can go on hating me. You can go on hounding me. There are no strings attached.”

“Why do you tell me this?”

“Because you’re beginning to fail me. It’s not your fault, Ed. You’re still determined, still hold a

strong belief that I’m a danger to the citizens you serve. It’s just that I’ve gone too far, got too big. You can’t give me competition anymore. You must know the truth as well as I do.” He tapped the phone on his desk. “I’d simply have to lift that phone to send you pounding a beat out in the sticks.” He stopped suddenly and looked toward the door. A squat, heavy-set man stood there.

“What’s your trouble, Rogers, and what do you mean walking in on me like this?”

“Hell,” said the short man, swaying on his legs, “I’m needing some credit, Joe, and—”

“Joseph,” interrupted the big man gently but not pleasantly.

“Can it, Joe,” said Rogers. “You’re getting too big for your pants. I want a couple of grand. Anyway, I told that damned little monkey that I was playing red and—”

“Get out,” said Joseph Fenton, coming to his feet and advancing menacingly. “Get out and don’t come back even when you’re sober or I’ll have you tossed

out.”

“Me?” The short man started to talk, but Joseph Fenton pushed him through the door and closed it.

“Well”—Eddie Blair got quietly to his feet— “even a giant has fleas. I’ll be seeing you again.”

“Sure, sure,” said Joe, affably. “And don’t think too much about this private graveyard of mine. The dead might come back and haunt you. Remember, Ed, life is what you make it. Mine is to build a beautiful garden and there mustn’t be any weeds in it.”

“The Gavin girl then was a weed?”

“That’s right. Sometimes you pull them out by the roots and toss them into the neighbor’s yard, other times you need weed killer. Sure you won’t take that ten grand?”

“No.” Eddie Blair shook his head.

“Don’t tell me you are still set on punishing me?” The big man put a hand on the detective’s shoulder and was slightly surprised when he realized that he had to reach up to do it. “I won’t discourage you, Ed, but you’re getting dull—the most promising young detective the department ever had—that’s from an editorial in the *Times* a few years back—so a lot of small fry have me to thank for taking you off their tails. Got a plan, Ed?”

“Yes,” said Eddie Blair, “I got a plan.”

“Ed.” The big racketeer almost drooled sentiment. “I’ve got good news for you. How you can retire from the conflict and not lose face. Things have gone too far and I’ve moved too fast. A couple of years ago, yes. A year ago even you might have turned the trick if you could have piled up the evidence to back that knowledge of yours. But now it’s too late. If everything you know or think you know was true and you had evidence that would wrap me up tight for a jury, the city couldn’t use it, wouldn’t dare use it. If I went down now I’d take a lot of big names with me. If I was ever brought to trial I’d blow the lid right off City Hall. The cards are stacked against you. Still got a plan?”

Eddie Blair smiled pleasantly.

“Yes,” he replied, “I still got a plan. It’s been a long, hard battle, Joseph, but at last the finger’s on you.”

“It must be some plan.” Joseph Fenton whistled good-naturedly. “I suppose I’m not to know about it yet.”

“Why not?” Eddie Blair walked toward the door. “It’s about those fleas of yours.”

Then he walked out into the hall, down the stairs, passed through the iron door with the small steel grating in it, turned left at the foot of the stairs and, passing up the big dining room, went into the bar.

“You must have been lucky,” said the overdressed, sharp-featured man, as he saw the wad of bills the detective put back in his pocket after peeling off a twenty.

“I’m always lucky,” Eddie told him.

“That isn’t the way I heard it.”

“Jordon, isn’t it?” Eddie ignored the crack. “Friend of Biff Rogers, aren’t you?” And when the other stiffened: “Oh, hell, Biff did me a good turn a couple of years back.” And, lowering his voice: “Not a word to anyone if you want to keep living, but tell Biff to get out of town now, tonight. That’s all.”

Eddie Blair tossed down his drink and went out into the night. It had been a long trail. He thought that the breaks were coming his way at last.

But before he went to bed that night he managed to toss a little advice and a lot of money around the Avenue. He slept like a child for the first time in months.

Inspector O’Leary had kindly blue eyes, at least at the moment they were kindly. His hair, what there was of it, was showing distinct traces of white with the gray. He looked out the window down to the street fourteen stories below, his back turned to

Detective Eddie Blair while he talked.

“I sent for you, Eddie, because I wanted to talk to you like a Dutch uncle. I’ll begin with your own story. You weren’t in uniform eighteen months before you were a detective. After that you ran up the ladder fast to a detective, first grade. Then acting sergeant when Rankin went overseas and you came back with a lot of lead in your leg that— By the way, how is that leg now?”

“As good as ever.” Eddie Blair nodded. “I told them it would be before they sent me home. I couldn’t tell which leg was the wounded one without rolling up my trousers the day the boat docked.”

“Fine, fine.” Inspector O’Leary licked at his lips. He didn’t like what he had to say, so he went along with the introduction, adding to it, elaborating on it.

“I’m telling you, boy, by the time Rankin came back to his job there wasn’t a doubt in my mind you’d be a lieutenant and well on your way to take charge of homicide. But, no, Joseph R. Fenton—he played on your mind. You wanted to work on him. It was a noble ambition, if a personal one, and—”

“There was,” Eddie cut in respectfully but determinedly, “nothing personal in it. It was my job that the people paid me to do. Joe Fenton”—he laid emphasis on the “Joe,” noticing the inspector’s use of the “Joseph”—“was and is the greatest single menace to law and order and decent government in the city today.”

“There is no denying that, boy.” The inspector half-turned now. “I let you drop your role as acting sergeant and go back to first grade again and spend your time —” He paused now and swung around and faced Blair. “Most of your time, not all of it, hunting down Joseph R. Fenton. The rest of the time, well, Eddie, there were a few cases you told me you were sure you could clean up. You never did. You knew more about them than any man in the department. Now a couple of years have passed, the things are cold. It’s hard, almost impossible to pick up the threads again.”

“Just what particular case are you thinking of?” Blair asked easily.

“All of them,” the inspector threw back. And then: “If you want to name one in particular, there’s the Burton-Hughes jewelry robbery, over a hundred thousand dollars worth of stuff.”

“Oh, that—” Eddie shrugged his shoulders. “I read the *Times* this morning. The editorial about police efficiency and—” Before the inspector could cut in, he

lifted a large flat envelope from his briefcase by the chair, tossed it onto the inspector's desk and said simply, "I think this clears it up. Three of them were in it, but Biff Rogers handled the job." And as the inspector made a dive for the desk and ripped open the envelope: "None of the stuff was ever fenced out. That's right, inspector, it's all evidence, not knowledge."

"Well, I'll be damned." The inspector went through one document after another. "Eddie—" He pressed a button on his desk. "And all this time I've been hearing stories about you, queer stories, spending money around and a hint where, but never mind that now—" Hurrying to the door, he passed out of the room, leaving Eddie Blair sitting by his desk, smiling to himself.

That was only one of Eddie's many visits with the inspector. And each time the inspector was flabbergasted at having Eddie produce a complete case covering one of the very crimes he was complaining that Eddie had neglected. There was the actual leader in the Long Island kidnapping of a black market operator. The strange torch murder of the Devlin brothers solved for him. But with it all, he took time out to admonish the detective.

"Look, Eddie," he said. "I've felt like a father toward you, proud of what you did, what you would do. I wanted to see Fenton caught and punished as much as you did. I know as well as you do that he personally killed the Gavin woman, but my hands were tied, for there was not the slightest shred of evidence. And now he's become too big, involved with too many big names. I'm not saying that anyone directly told me to lay off Joseph R. Fenton, but I've been on the force a long time, Eddie, a very long time. The arrest, the conviction, even the trial of Joseph R. Fenton at this time would shake the very foundations of the city government. And it's not that, Eddie, not that I'd protect anyone, or the commissioner would protect anyone. No, Eddie. It would shake the confidence of the citizens. It's not that it's criminal, it's that some prominent men have been foolish, others found it politically expedient to ... to associate with Joseph R. Fenton."

And when Eddie still looked at him but said nothing: "Can't you understand these things? Can't you understand the difference between being indiscreet and criminal? Can't you understand the meaning of the word expedient? Look at me. I'll be up for retirement in a few years. Last week I attended a dinner and sat on the speakers' stand beside the guest of honor whom a few years ago I wouldn't have trusted alone in any part of my house. But politicians suggested I attend. It

was expedient.”

“And you are telling me all these things so I’ll find it expedient to lay off Fenton?”

“Not exactly.” The inspector faced him squarely now. “I know how you stick to things. I am showing you the uselessness of your attempt to get Joseph R. Fenton, that if you had all the evidence in the world it wouldn’t be advisable to use it.” And after a long pause: “You’re seeing a lot of Joseph R. Fenton. You visit his night spot. You have been in his gaming room. Both the law and the lawless know you as thrifty, yet, shall we say it’s simply a rumor that after leaving Fenton you often display quite a roll of money, spend quite a bit of money, and have lost as much as five hundred dollars to a single bookmaker?”

“Oh, that.” Eddie shrugged broad shoulders. “It’s more than a rumor, inspector. I’ve worked hard, saved a lot. I’m sort of messed up on Big Joe Fenton. Now I’m having a little fling. I like to call it an investment in—”

“In what?” asked the inspector.

“Fleas,” said Eddie, and went out of the room whistling.

But that same night Eddie Blair visited the Gilded Peacock, and after leaving Fenton had a little talk with Gunner Duncan. He caught Duncan alone and in a sullen mood at the end of the bar. He walked up to him, displaying a handful of money that he was sorting and shoving into his pockets.

“Have a drink, Duncan,” he invited.

Duncan looked at him from mean little eyes. Duncan was a killer and Eddie knew it. He was a throwback from the old days of Prohibition, when machine guns blazed and Gunner stood behind one squeezing lead.

“I’m not particular, copper.” Duncan ordered his drink. “Been up to see the big boss?”

“Sure,” said Eddie. “Joe is coming along. He wants to know the right people, do the right thing. There were days when you knew him, Duncan.”

“I know him now.” Duncan almost snapped the words.

“I mean—well, I just had a drink with him upstairs. You don’t get above stairs much now, do you?”

“I don’t want to get up there.” Duncan slammed his drink down on the bar and glared at Eddie.

“Of course you don’t, why should you? You wouldn’t fit. Never ride a friend, don’t push too hard to get upstairs.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean Joe’s a nice guy, a white guy. He’s going big places now, Duncan. You just don’t fit.” And after a pause: “And don’t try to make yourself fit. Joe don’t like guys who try to make themselves fit. Or did you try? How’s your brother Frank?”

“Don’t bring that kid into it.”

Eddie didn’t smile, though he knew “that kid” was twenty-seven, would stab his own father if there was enough in it, was disliked by even his own associates and had but one friend, a feared friend, a friend who made him tolerated along the Avenue, in the under life of a great city. And that friend was the impulsive, gun-toting, gun-using brother of the kid, Gunner Duncan himself.

“Bring the kid into what?” Eddie asked innocently.

“Whatever you’re beefing around about. You’d think I’d bought you a drink from the advice you’re giving me.”

“Well,” said Eddie suddenly, “you buy me a drink and I’ll give you the best advice anyone ever gave you.” And finishing his drink: “You didn’t know it, Gunner, but that kid brother of yours gave me a tip once that saved my life.”

Duncan stared at the detective in amazement.

“You’re trying to tell me he ratted out on someone? Gave a copper a break?”

“It’ll cost you a couple of bucks only to hear what I have to say. Take a chance. Buy me a drink.”

“Hell,” said Duncan, beckoning to the bartender, who took his time in coming, “I’ve had cops beat me out of drinks before. I guess I can go it again.” And when the drinks were served: “O.K., spring your joke.”

“A certain guy don’t like you, Gunner. He didn’t like Biff Rogers. He didn’t like Alf Reardon. He didn’t like the Garson brothers. He didn’t like Jake Swingle.” Pausing long enough to let the names sink home, he went on, “He don’t like your brother Frank. So, if your kid brother had anything to do with that shooting in the New Jersey end of the Holland Tunnel, why, tell him to leave town, now.”

“What guy? You don’t mean—”

Eddie drained his glass, put it down on the bar, gave Duncan a pat on the back and said, “A little vacation wouldn’t do you any harm either.” Then, turning, he walked out of the bar.

He spent a few more dollars in the night spots, put a couple of century notes on a horse with a bookmaker who never could keep his mouth shut, then, dropping into an all-night drugstore, he put a nickel in the slot and called Inspector O’Leary.

The next morning Inspector O’Leary was in high good humor.

“Biff Rogers,” he exclaimed. “Alf Reardon, the Garson brothers, Jake Swingle. And I got your call last night and picked up Frank Duncan.” He went over the papers, spread them out on his desk. “Every time I made a pinch the *Times* nearly bent over backward apologizing in editorials. You must have worked day and night to collect all that stuff.” After a pause: “But some of those affidavits are dated back pretty far. It seems to me you had plenty of evidence a year back.”

“Put it down to my being overcautious,” Eddie told him. “Besides, I wanted to have it all together, throw the book at you.”

“Enough, boy.” The inspector put an arm around Eddie’s shoulder and led him to the window. “You look tired. You must have lost twenty pounds on this ... this Joseph Fenton end of it. I want you to forget that and, by God, I’m going to put your name up for sergeant, regardless. They can’t ignore this record.”

“What,” asked Eddie, “do you mean by ‘regardless’?”

“The money you’ve been spending. I know it isn’t so, Eddie, but it looks to others as if it came straight from—well, you never used to toss money around. There are those who say you went after Joseph R. Fenton and he bought you over, Eddie.”

“Is that so?” Eddie didn’t seem much impressed.

“It’s great work.” The inspector was fingering the papers on the desk that appeared to clear up the Holland Tunnel killing nearly eighteen months back. “It seems to me, Eddie, there’s enough right here even to throw the book at Gunner Duncan himself. Of course, he must have been behind it. Now, don’t get excited, I’ve kept my word. Your instructions were to bring Frank Duncan in and lay off his brother. You must have had a reason. I don’t know but—”

The phone rang and the inspector swept it from its cradle with the ease of long familiarity.

“Yes,” he said, and then: “By God, you don’t say so! Right in front of his own house.” A long pause, then some quick instructions and the inspector put down the phone and turned back to Eddie.

“Your game is over, Eddie,” he said. “Big Joe Fenton was shot to death right in front of his own house less than ten minutes ago. You should have let me drag Gunner Duncan in last night. It’s pretty certain he popped Fenton off.”

“It is?” Eddie leaned back. “Why should I have let you pull Gunner in last night?”

“Because—well, it’s murder, isn’t it?” And looking steadily at Eddie: “You like it this way.”

“Yes,” said Eddie, slowly, “I like it this way.” And watching the wrinkles running in and out of the inspector’s face, he put his hand in his pocket and took out his bank book, his savings account book. “If you want to look through this, you’ll see where the money I spent came from. I drew the money from the bank each day that I intended to pay Big Joe a visit.” And with a grin: “Not Joseph anymore, I notice.”

“The dead,” said the inspector solemnly, “don’t have power.” And after a full minute of silence: “Biff Rogers, the Garson brothers, Jake Swingle

and Frank Duncan. You saw them all. Saw their friends just before ... before you turned them in to me. They all knew Big Joe, of course.”

“Everybody knew Big Joe. I thought those boys were friends of Joe’s, or could be. I rather liked them, inspector. I hated to see them take a ride. They were Big Joe’s fleas.”

“Like that, eh? Like that.” The inspector stroked his chin and spoke more as if he were thinking aloud. “You visit Big Joe, you display money, you talk around a bit, hint that Joe doesn’t like them, and when the stage is set you give me the evidence and they are dragged in. Quite a few, until they begin to suspect that maybe Big Joe is—” And directly to Eddie Blair now: “Did you talk to Gunner Duncan last night?”

“Last night.” Eddie looked up at the ceiling. “I was talking to Big Joe last night. I was listening to him tell me how much smarter he was than I, but I knew that a year ago. I was listening to what a giant he was. But you had told me that, too. He was beyond the law. Odd, isn’t it, but he wasn’t beyond the lawless. Now that I think of it I did talk to Gunner Duncan last night. He bought me a drink, too. He was one of Big Joe’s fleas. Fascinating thing, fleas. Even giants have them.”

THE END.