

Secrets

by Roland Foster

[This is a transcript of a recording presumably made by Mr. Alfred Pennyworth, who retired some years ago and left the city — it is not known for whom he intended it.]

I have had a fascination with secrets all my life. I learned to read before age four, and that skill unlocked secrets for me that I thought were unknown to other children, some older than myself and already in primary school. Alas, I quickly learned that my “secret” ability was shared with many millions of others. Still, I loved to read, and I loved the idea of having secrets.

The comprehensive school I attended was unusual in that its library had been given a collection of American fiction that was deemed suitable for secondary students. In Year 6, in the school library, I chanced upon a Hardy Boys novel, *The Secret Panel*. What fun it would be, I thought, to disappear through a hidden panel into a secret passageway and pop out somewhere else in the house. I imagined that one day I might inherit or purchase an old mansion, and discover some secret passages — or create them during its renovation. It was a silly, wishful dream, of course.

In my teen years I fell passionately in love. Roxanne was lovely, very like Mark Twain’s description of Becky Thatcher — blue eyes and long blond hair, though without the braids. Should I confess to her that I adored her? Of course not! My love would remain my treasured secret, shared with no one.

Spencer Willis spoiled it, as of course Spencer would. He saw my gaze fixed upon her, and forthwith announced my secret passion to the entire world, much to the chagrin of both Roxanne and myself. I thought of killing him and hiding his body where it would never be found — that would be a whacking good secret, right enough. But murdering Spencer, while justified, was a bit extreme, and also quite impractical. Instead I decided to discover an embarrassing secret of his and publish it far and wide. He, of all people, certainly would have guilty secrets.

Time passed. Roxanne moved away, Spencer left to go to Sandhurst, and I discovered Ian Fleming. Ah, to be a secret agent — what a lark that would be. “Bond ... Alfred Bond” — it hadn’t quite the right ring to it, but I would adopt a better spy name when I needed it. Of course I had no idea how to become a secret agent. But then, after giving it some thought, I realized I would prefer to have my excitement in rather smaller portions.

I tried university, but nothing that was on offer appealed to me. I dropped out before the end of the first year. Then for two years I worked at more than a dozen different jobs — waiter, bartender, lorry and limousine driver, packer in a biscuit factory, assistant cook, even cleaner. It was not that I could not hold a job; it was that none of those jobs could hold me.

I did, after all, become a government agent of a sort, but that is a tale I shan’t go into. I tried it, I was adequate at it, but I found I did not like it. I bowed out quickly and fairly gracefully, promising not to tell what I knew, which was, in truth, very little. Then, almost in desperation, I left England and ventured off to find my future in the New World.

Newly arrived in a large American city, with little money and a British accent, what else was there to do but become an actor? Which, of course, I did. I loitered in places where would-be actors gathered, becoming one of many hundreds who were hoping to be "discovered." After only a fortnight, someone mentioned me to someone else who knew of a producer or director who was looking for "somebody British," and I found myself auditioning for a part in an off-Broadway play. Having, or not having, acting talent was beside the point; I was tall, reasonably decent looking, and I talked a bit like Laurence Olivier. I got the part.

One evening, during the intermission, a man came to the dressing room I shared with several others. He gave me a card with just his name on it — Thomas Wayne. He asked if I would join him and his wife for a drink after the play. I asked why, and he said that he wanted to ask me something. Which sounded a bit off, somehow; and yet his demeanor was friendly, and he seemed eager for me to accept his invitation, so I did.

When I left the theater, Mr. Wayne met me at the stage door. We stepped around the corner to a waiting limousine, and he introduced me to his wife, Martha, and George, his chauffeur. We were swiftly whisked away and delivered to the door of a posh club, I think it may have been 21. The doorman knew Mr. and Mrs. Wayne, and the maître d' showed us immediately to a reserved table.

After a glass of claret and a few rather awkward attempts at polite conversation, Mr. Wayne came to the point. He said he had seen my acting, and judged I was no Olivier, to which I readily agreed. He also said he had had me investigated, locally and in London, and I was reported to be honest, a hard worker, and reasonably intelligent. Since his assistant was retiring, he needed to employ a new one, and he thought I might fill the bill.

"Doing what, exactly?" I asked.

He said, "I think the proper word is 'factotum' — in other words, doing whatever I need done. Part butler, sometime chauffeur, occasional temporary cook — everything."

"Valet, as well?" I asked.

He replied, "Yes, sometimes, in a limited way. I don't need help getting dressed."

I liked the couple — they seemed genuine and sincere; and the idea of being a manservant of sorts did not put me off. It would be a pleasant change from my indifferent acting efforts. I mentioned salary, and he named a figure, which I mentally converted to pounds and found quite acceptable. Then he asked how soon I could leave the play and the room I was renting. "After tomorrow," I said, and we agreed that George would collect me the following day.

Thus began my association with the Wayne family, and it was a life far different to any I had ever expected to lead. Mr. and Mrs. Wayne were splendid employers, who treated me almost like a guest in their home, though of course I had many duties to perform. When I lacked a needed skill, I learned it, and fortunately I never tried Mr. Wayne's patience to the point of anger. What a wonderful man he was!

Their only child, Bruce, soon became very special to me. He was quite bright, and had amazing patience for one so young. He was five when I met him, and as he matured through his teen years and into manhood, despite the difference in our ages, we became

fast friends. In public I called him “Master Bruce,” and later “Mr. Wayne,” but in private he was always simply “Bruce.”

You may know about the senseless murder of Bruce’s parents, right before his eyes. What is not generally known is that Thomas Wayne’s sister, Clarice, then became Bruce’s guardian. She moved into the manor, and I stayed on. After Bruce turned twenty-five and assumed control of Wayne Enterprises, he offered to “set me free,” as he jokingly put it, with a generous pension, anywhere in the world I wanted to go. Of course I had no desire to go, and I told him so.

That was when Bruce informed me of his plan to become a shadowy crime fighter. Naturally I was apprehensive, but also quite enthralled, and not entirely surprised. We had talked of many things since his parents were killed, and I knew of his passion to oppose those who had no respect for law or decency.

We worked as a team to implement his plan, purchasing, devising, often even inventing what was needed; and I can say with some pride that I contributed significantly. We spent many happy hours together designing and building that splendid automobile. But my own most significant contribution, one that brought joy to my childhood heart, was the design and construction of the laboratory beneath Wayne manor, and the secret panels and passageways that gave access to it.

Thus, not yet in my dotage but well on the way to it, I found that my childhood dream of hidden panels and secret passages had become reality. And as the confidant and co-conspirator of the “Caped Crusader,” I was privy to an astonishing array of secrets.

As young Dick Grayson, our Robin, might have exclaimed, “Holy wish fulfillment!”

The End