

Con Artist

by Kevin Myrick

The name he was using this time was Paul Sterling. Sterling always went by Paul, by he filled in a new last name for each new town he passed through. His life as a thief and con artist began when his father threw him out on the streets at the age of 14. Sterling was deemed incorrigible by the man who raised him; the final straw to get him tossed out on his ear was spending an entire night out with his hoodlum friends drinking booze.

Sterling learned the ropes of running the con over next couple of years from his mentor and one-time partner Connor. Sterling mastered being able to shed his identity like a snake squirms out of its old skin. It became routine to pack everything up in a suitcase and take a midnight train out of town once the money dried up and life became too boring. The whistle blew in the darkness and the conductor shouted “All aboard!” once more before the car lurched forward and sped up to carry Sterling away to some new point chosen randomly on a map. Sleep brought about the passing from one Paul to the next, and when he woke he was a whole new person in a whole new place.

He specialized in certain kinds of scams. Connor taught him to keep things simple enough to seem simple, but then to draw them into a more complicated web over time. Not look at getting a simple score of a few hundred bucks when there can be thousands, hundreds of thousands even, behind the first dollar handed over. The more complicated the scheme, the more likely people were to believe it, Connor said. Men of great wealth were especially fond of throwing good money after bad.

“Make it sound like its the best deal in the world kid, and you'll be set for life,” Connor said.

Sterling also mastered the art form of talking to people with money as if he himself had lots of money. He glad handed with the sons and grandsons of bank managers and factory owners, of propertied lawyers and even the third generation owners of plantations seeking to make their fortune of something other than cotton grown by lazy sharecroppers. When luck turned sour on finding fortunes through the fellows he briefly befriended, Sterling found financial gain by lifting the skirts of middle aged widows without heirs to leave their money. Love affairs were followed by short marriages ending tragically when Sterling's new wife would die under mysterious circumstance. Crocodile tears slid down his cheeks when he collected his ill-gotten gains, sold off the property cheap and moved on to a fresh sucker to increase the balance of his bank account.

He'd cried "Poor Ellie!" as Paul Conley in Bristol, Mississippi after he found his new wife at the foot the stairs with her neck broken. It was all too convenient Conley gave the servants the Sunday off when she died. Paul Larson wept at his wife Mary's graveside in Beaufort, South Carolina as an Episcopal rector officiated the funeral service. She died weeks after the couple returned from a European honeymoon. The doctor told everyone she died of a heart attack, but he could not deny a troubling feeling in the back of his mind. When examining her body before the undertaker carried her away from the house, the doctor found a feather in her nostril which he couldn't explain how it got there.

Rumor had it that Paul Glint got his wife Amanda drunk before they took a midnight skinny dip in a pond outside of Lynchburg, Tennessee. Authorities still wanted answers from Glint about her death and what happened to all her money and the cash held in reserve at the Moore County Savings and Loan.

The people of Maycomb, Alabama would have rode Paul Pinchman out of town on a rail if given the chance. They might even have lynched him, though Sterling highly doubted that would have

actually happened. Maycomb couldn't put together 12 men smart enough to convict him of a crime, much less tie the knot to make a noose. Sterling was confident if he ever got caught he could talk his way out of it.

It was a close shave as Pinchman. He tried to carry off two scams at the same time - always a bad idea - and he nearly got caught with his hand in the cookie jar and in bed with another woman. Pinchman set himself up as an executive from New York City seeking investors as part of a scheme on Wall Street taking advantage in loopholes. Pinchman promised the money men of Maycomb "bags and bags of money gentleman! You won't be sorry when you see the returns it yields! A whole two hundred percent!"

The money men grumbled at the promise and as a group said no, but some of the men approached him after with smaller sums of cash. A thousand here, a thousand there. Lots of pennies can add to real money when all of it came together in one big pile. He had about \$20,000 already when one of the town councilmen came up to him one afternoon in the local diner for a cup of coffee.

"Can you really make us that much money?" he asked. "I mean, it sounds too good to be true."

"I can guarantee you won't be disappointed with the results sir," Pinchman said. He pocketed the check and deposited it into an account he set up for his retirement under the name of Paul Pennywise at the First National Bank in Atlanta. It mostly grew by a few hundred dollars a month when the people who bought his fake life insurance policies sent in their monthly payments. Sterling sold them to people in sections of town with names like Licksillet or Booger Hollow, places where the people were land poor and basically uneducated. He promised that for two dollars and fifty cents a month they could be secure in knowing they'd be leaving behind a thousand dollars for their relatives.

“I know it sounds like a lot of money to you folks, I know for sure it does,” whichever Paul he happened to be at the time would say. “Think of the money you'll be giving back to your family when you've gone up to heaven. Think of all the bills that will be left when you're gone. You wouldn't want to burden your children with all those costs, now would you?”

That was normally enough to get people to send in their monthly payments to the “company address,” which also happened to be a post office box also in Atlanta. He went once a month to the city to collect the cash, put it in the bank then send out new billing statements to the clients in towns all across the south where Sterling had been in the past. It was his retirement fund. Sterling didn't want to make his daily bread off of the stupidity of others forever.

Paul Pinchman also took on the role of Don Juan when he lived in Maycomb. The woman was another young widow by the name of Elizabeth Bennett. Her husband had been 20 years her senior and died one night the year before Pinchman came to town in an automobile accident. Mr. Bennett left behind a mansion and a pile of Coca-Cola money. Pinchman's eyes filled with dollar signs as he saw the opportunities spinning around him to make more and more money. Maybe, Pinchman told himself, he'd retire earlier than he expected.

Pinchman made the mistake of not focusing on one task at a time. His divided attentions and keeping up with the lies and stories caught him up in a situation that spun out of control. Then one afternoon a month after they married Elizabeth caught Pinchman in bed with her 16-year-old cousin. The shoe dropped later than night after Pinchman was out of the mansion and into a hotel room. The town councilman showed back up, said he needed the money back.

Someone got wind that town money went missing. Pinchman took the pragmatic approach.

There was no earthly reason for him to stay now the money was all dried up here in Maycomb. Elizabeth was no worry either. Unable to live with the grief of losing her true love and finding what she thought was her new love sleeping with another woman, she climbed into a warm bath and watched her life drain away in a red stain around her. Pinchman simply caught a midnight train as he'd done so many times before to Birmingham and woke as Paul Sterling when he arrived with the sunrise.

Sterling felt nothing for Elizabeth, or Amanda, or even poor Ellie who broke her neck falling down the stairs. Those memories happened to some else as far as Sterling was concerned. Sterling believed each day brought on a new opportunity to be whoever he chose when he woke each morning. Yesterday he was Paul Pinchman, an investment sales executive. Today he was Paul Sterling. Tomorrow he'd be another Paul, from another place, with another life entirely of his own making.

