

Cracking The Nixon Health Case

By Russell Baker

He is a big blond guy who looks like he might have played some football in college and he is sitting there in the office when I get back from being beaten up in The Case of the Dissonant Tango.

"They tell me you're an outmoded old private eye with a battered heap and too much integrity," he says.

"Get to the point," says I.

He says his name is Ford and he is President of the United States.

"Sure," says I, "and my name is Spade and I'm the cracker of The Maltese Falcon Case."

He believes me.

"Actually," I tell him, "my name is Philip Marlowe and I'm the cracker of the Lady in the Lake job."

He believes that, too. I decide maybe he really is Ford.

Pretty soon I am tooling my heap up to San Clemente to solve the Nixon Health Mystery. A guy wearing a business suit and an affidavit face stops me at the gate. A heater bulging on his hip makes him a Secret Service agent, so I say, "How's the boss feeling these days?"

"Who wants to know, shamus?" he asks.

I tell him I cannot reveal my client's identity but he's a man in position to transfer Secret Service agents from California to the Bozeman, Mont., field

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office, and park my heap in a clump of oleander bushes to give the author time to cook up some plot action.

Pretty soon out comes this bright-eyed jasper who says his name is Bebe. "Don't tell anybody where these came from," he says, slipping me a sheaf of medical charts which look almost as bad as the Dow Jones trend for the past six months.

Back in L. A., I put the Bebe documents in a bus station locker when suddenly the phone rings.

"This is Eddie Cox speaking, Spade or Marlowe or whoever you are," he says. "Don't believe those medical charts, understand?"

"You mean the big guy is really in the pink, Eddie?" I ask.

"He's worse than the charts indicate," says the voice. "Much, much worse. Get me?" The phone clicks dead.

I drive home. He is on the bathroom floor. I roll him over and don't recognize him, but I realize he is as sick as a man can be. A note stuffed in his lapel button hole says, "If you think this man is sick, you ought to see Nixon."

Somebody is playing rough. I throw some water in my face, get in the heap, drive to London and park in a clump of palm trees outside the American Embassy. Three hours later Ambassador Walter Annenberg comes out.

"There's a sick man on my bathroom floor and I want to know who put him there," I tell Annenberg. Annenberg says it can't be Nixon. "I just talked to him on the phone. His voice was firm and he seemed completely normal to me," says His Excellency.

I am sitting in a New York restaurant trying to figure it out over \$7.50 worth of hamburger and beer. If the big fellow is as sick as Eddie says he is, which is twice as sick as Bebe's chart say he is, why does Annenberg say he's got a firm voice?

I am suddenly joined by a big man with rich eyes. He speaks in an aerosol hiss. "You don't know me, Spade, or Marlowe, or whoever you are, but the name is Abplanalp. I'm just going to say it once so listen carefully. Annenberg doesn't know what he's talking about." He is gone.

I drive all night and wind up sitting in the heap in a clump of bayberry bushes outside the Washington home of Dr. Walter Tkach. I grab him on the way to the infirmary.

"How's President Nixon's health, sawbones?" I ask.

"We have never had a President in better health," says he.

"Then why do Bebe, Eddie and Abplanalp tell me he's lower than the Dow Jones?"

"They're perfectly right," says Tkach.

"How is it if we've never had a President in better health he's too sick to say how he feels?"

"Simply," says Tkach. "He's not President any more."

I am sitting in the Oval Office telling Ford I have cracked the case. "This mystery is so complex," I tell him, "that it can never be solved. There is only one man alive who could have masterminded a mystery as impenetrable as this."

"Professor Moriarity?" asks Ford.

"Richard Nixon," I tell him.

"And he would have to be in good health to do it?" Ford asks.

"That depends on how you define good health," I say.

He believes me.