

Origins

by Mike Resnick

There is a beginning, an origin, to all things. This is one of them. Only the facts have been changed, since they sometimes get in the way of the Truth.

* * * *

The visitor looked down at the drawing board.

"Funny animals?" he said distastefully.

The cartoonist sighed and turned to his visitor, who was looking over his shoulder.

"No choice," he replied wearily. "Nobody seems to want crime strips."

"I do," said the visitor.

"You're not an editor, more's the pity."

"I thought your strip was excellent. Why did they turn it down?"

The cartoonist shrugged. "If I knew, I could change it. Maybe it's not realistic enough, maybe they don't like my drawing style, maybe it's too grim. Who knows?"

"Well, I thought it was realistic," said the visitor. "Especially that part about the jewel robbery. I thought it was brilliant."

"Thanks, Melvin. I wish somebody with a budget would agree with you."

"I keep asking you not to call me Melvin," said the visitor irritably.

"Sorry," said the cartoonist. "What was it you wanted to be called again?"

"Nimrod."

"Okay ... but I don't know what you have against your real name."

"Nimrod's is my real name. My middle name."

"Whatever makes you happy," said the cartoonist.

"I don't think it's too much to ask. After all, you ask people to call you Chet and not Chester."

"You have a point," agreed Chet. "Nimrod it is."

"Well," said Nimrod, looking at his wristwatch, "I gotta go. Anything I can do for you?"

"You might keep your radio a little softer after midnight," said Chet with a smile. "Even unemployed cartoonists need their sleep."

"You won't hear a sound tonight," said Nimrod with an odd grin. "I promise it."

"Thanks," said Chet. "Just let yourself out." A moment later he was oblivious to the rest of the world as he painstakingly drew a horde of funny animals doing funny things, and wondered, for the hundredth time,

why he'd ever wanted to get into this profession in the first place.

* * * *

He awoke early, shaved and dressed, and walked into the living room to examine the work he'd done the previous night. Not bad, he concluded -- but also not what he'd had in mind when he had trained to become a cartoonist.

"Still," he muttered, "even an artist has to eat."

And, he reminded himself grimly, no one was beating down his door for funny animal strips, any more than they had lined up to buy his crime strip.

He spent a few more minutes checking last night's drawings, changing some shading here, inserting darkening a line there, then put on his overcoat and went around the corner to the local delicatessen for coffee and a roll. Along the way he picked up a copy of the morning paper.

He entered the deli, seated himself in a booth, and immediately turned to the comics page. There was Krazy Kat, and Tarzan, and Mutt and Jeff, fine comics all, but, damn it, the paper really needed something realistic and contemporary. He shook his head in bewilderment and decided that one of these days he'd have to take another shot at the crime strip.

He turned to the sports section next, and finally checked the front page.

DARING JEWEL ROBBERY!, the headline blared out at him. Well, the more data he collected, the more realistic his strip would appear when he finally went back to work on it, so he sighed, sipped his coffee, and began reading.

A solitary thief had broken into the biggest jewelry store in town, and had made off with almost half a million dollars worth of rare gems, literally under the noses of the police force. So brilliant and innovative was the crime that authorities speculated that it may very well have been the work of a professional psychologist.

First the thief had entered five neighboring shops, all sharing the same roof, and tripped the alarms in each. All hell had broken loose as the air was filled with bells and sirens, and the police were on the scene less than two minutes later. They realized almost instantly that no one had taken anything, and decided that the situation was due to faulty wiring among the connected buildings. Then, as all the alarms were blaring away, the thief had entered the jewelry store ... and no one had paid any special attention to one more alarm. While the police were looking for a way to turn the alarms off, he had taken what he wanted and then blended in with the huge crowd of onlookers.

The cartoonist frowned and read the account of the robbery once more. Then, deeply disturbed, he got up without finishing his coffee, tucked the paper under his arm, and returned home.

* * * *

"Hi, Chet!" said Nimrod, sticking his head into the cartoonist's apartment. "Have a good day?"

"Not especially," answered Chet.

"Well, maybe a nice dinner will cheer you up," said Nimrod. "My treat."

"I thought you were looking for work," said Chet.

Nimrod grinned. "I found some."

"They paid you the first day on the job?"

"It was piece work," said Nimrod. Suddenly he laughed uproariously, as if at a private joke. "Get your coat and come on. I'll even pop for champagne."

"I wish I could," answered Chet. "But I didn't get much work done today. I think I'd better stay here and plug away."

"I'd take that as a personal insult," said Nimrod ominously.

"No insult is intended," explained the cartoonist. "But I've got to try to make a living."

"Come on, Chet," said Nimrod, now almost pleading. "You're the only person in the building who's ever been nice to me. Now that I'm in the chips, I want to pay you back."

"In the chips -- from one day's work?"

Nimrod grinned again. "I have prospects." He paused. "So how about it? You gonna come out with me?"

"I really can't ... and you don't owe me anything, Melvin -- excuse me: Nimrod."

"Don't you want to be my friend?" persisted Nimrod.

"Of course I do."

"Then come out with me."

"I just can't," said Chet with a sigh. "I've got too much work to do."

"Can I still drop by and visit you?"

"When I'm not working."

"And we're still friends?"

"Of course."

"And I can still read your comic strips?"

"If you want to," said Chet with a sigh. "Hell, so far you're the only one who does."

"I especially like the crime strip."

"I know."

"I loved that story about the jewel robbery."

"It wasn't as original as I thought," replied Chet. "Last night someone pulled the very job I described."

"Really?" said Nimrod. "He must have been some kind of genius." He paused. "They never caught the thief in your strip, did they?"

"No," admitted the cartoonist. He smiled. "That's why it's a crime strip and not a detective strip. But I'm no criminal mastermind, and this is real life -- I'm sure the cops'll catch this guy before too long."

"A guy smart enough to pull that kind of job?" said Nimrod. "I wouldn't bet on it, Chet." He paused. "Well, I'm off. You sure you don't want to come along?"

Chet shook his head. "No. I really have to get back to work. If Disney can sell a mouse, maybe I can sell my animals."

"Disney loved that mouse, Chet. You love crime. You ought to stick to what you love."

"Tell that to the landlord and the phone company," replied Chet wearily.

* * * *

It was two days later that the cartoonist came home in midafternoon after another unsuccessful sales pitch to the comic syndicate and found his door unlocked. Frowning, he cautiously entered his apartment and found Nimrod sitting on the floor, a number of drawings spread out in front of him.

"What the hell are you doing here?" demanded the cartoonist.

"Oh, hi, Chet," said Nimrod, looking up with a smile. "I didn't have anything to do, so I thought I'd stop by and read some more of your stuff."

"Did you ever hear of breaking and entering?"

"I didn't think you'd mind. After all, we're friends, aren't we?"

"Of course I mind!" snapped Chet. "This is my apartment, not a public library." He paused. "How did you get in here anyway?"

"I picked your lock."

"Where did you learn to pick locks?"

"From you, Chet," answered Nimrod easily.

"From me?"

"Well, from one of your crime strips. It's harder than you made it look, but it worked. You really know your stuff, Chet. You're some kind of genius."

"I'm also a private citizen who resents having his apartment broken into."

"I didn't mean to upset you, Chet," said Nimrod. He got to his feet. "I'll leave, if that's what you want."

"That's what I want."

"You want me to put these strips away first?"

"I'll take care of it."

Nimrod shrugged. "I hope you're not mad at me, Chet. I didn't mean any harm, really I didn't."

"I don't ever want you to do it again."

"Whatever you say. You're my only friend, Chet. Everyone else hates me. I don't want to do anything to make you mad, not a genius like you." Nimrod walked to the door, then turned. "Dinner tonight?"

"I don't think so."

Nimrod's face turned sullen. "I'm trying to be a nice guy, Chet. You don't appreciate me."

"You broke into my apartment," repeated Chet coldly.

"I already apologized for that," said Nimrod. "You really should be my friend, Chet. You wouldn't want me for an enemy. I can be very nasty to people I don't like."

"I'm sure you can be."

Suddenly Nimrod's expression softened. "You're just upset, Chet. We'll talk again tomorrow, okay?"

"We'll see," said the cartoonist noncommittally.

"We'll be friends again," said Nimrod confidently. "I'm going to make you proud of me. You'll see."

Then he was gone, and the cartoonist picked up his rejected strips and began filing them away.

* * * *

The next morning the headlines all related to a particularly ingenious bank robbery. The criminal had disguised himself as a bank officer, explained to his head teller that he had reason to suspect that certain safety deposit boxes had been looted, had the teller unlock them while he inspected them, faked a coughing seizure, and managed to appropriate almost \$200,000 in bearer bonds while the teller briefly left the vault to bring him a glass of water, never suspecting that he wasn't helping an old and trusted member of the bank's governing board. The thief had then helped the teller lock the boxes and expressed relief that his fears had been unfounded.

Two hours later the robbery had been discovered when an elderly businessman was going through his box's papers...

...and twenty minutes after he read the news story, the cartoonist presented himself at the local police station and asked to see someone in authority.

After a brief delay he was ushered into a small office, where he found himself facing a well-dressed young officer with dark hair, piercing gray eyes, a finely-chiselled nose, and a firm jaw.

"I'm Detective Richards," said the policeman. "Won't you please have a seat, Mister ... ah?"

"Gould," said the cartoonist. "Chet Gould."

"All right, Mr. Gould," said Richards. "What seems to be your problem?"

The cartoonist sighed. "I don't know exactly how to begin..."

"At the beginning, perhaps," suggested Richards with a smile.

"Let me start at the end," said Chet. "If you haven't thrown me out as some kind of crackpot, we can go back to the beginning and the middle."

"All right."

Chet took a deep breath. "I think I know who robbed that bank last night. And I think it's the same person who pulled off the big jewel heist three nights ago."

"The methods don't have much in common," commented Richards.

"You're wrong," said Chet. "They have one very important thing in common."

"Oh? And what is that?"

"I invented them."

Richards frowned. "Would you care to explain that?"

"I'm a cartoonist," said Chet. "Or, at least, I'm trying to be a cartoonist."

"What has that got to do with the robberies?" asked Richards.

"One of the strips that I tried to sell was a crime strip. In it, I described exactly the methods that were used to rob the jewelry store and the bank."

"You tried to sell it, you say?"

"That's right."

"But it's never appeared in print?"

"No."

Richards frowned again. "Do you realize what you're saying, Mr. Gould? If anyone is implicated by what appears in this unpublished comic strip, it's you."

Gould shook his head. "I have a neighbor. He just moved into the building a month ago. At first I thought he was merely eccentric, but over the past few days I've become convinced that he's actually psychotic."

"He's seen the strips?"

"Yes."

"And you think he's the thief?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why him?" asked Richards. "After all, if they've been rejected, at least a few editors have also seen them."

"Because he was absolutely penniless until the day after the jewel robbery, and then he offered to take me to dinner."

Richards smiled. "And from this, you deduce that he's a jewel thief?"

"He also offered to buy me a bottle of champagne."

"Generosity isn't a crime, Mr. Gould. Have you got anything else?"

"It's something I haven't got."

"I don't understand."

"Yesterday I caught him in my apartment. He had picked the lock, and when I found him he was going

through the pages of my unsold crime strip." Gould paused. "I was upset, of course, but it wasn't until I read the papers this morning that I realized what was happening."

"I still don't understand."

"The strip in which the safety deposit box holdup is shown is missing," said Chet.

"And you think he took it?"

"I know he did. It was there three days ago." He paused. "I thought I had just misfiled it, but I checked again before I came over here, and it's gone."

"No one's been in your apartment since you caught this man reading the strips?"

"Starving cartoonists don't hiring cleaning ladies," said Chet wryly.

"Of course, if it's missing, then you can't prove that you actually described the bank robbery," offered Richards.

"No," said Chet. "But I can show you that my plot for the jewel robbery was followed step by step."

He tossed a large manilla envelope onto the officer's desk. Richards reached inside it, pulled out the contents, and began studying them.

"All right, Mr. Gould," he said at last. "You've convinced me -- but this will never stand up in a court of law. The police can't touch him yet."

"Maybe you can keep him under observation," suggested Chet.

Richards considered the notion for a moment, then suddenly smiled. "I think I've got a better idea."

"Oh?"

The officer nodded. "But I'll need your help."

"I'll do anything I can," said Chet promptly. "But I warn you -- I'm no policeman."

"I've got all the policemen I need," answered Richards. "I need you to do what you're best at."

Chet looked puzzled. "What's that?"

Richards chuckled. "You're a cartoonist, Mr. Gould."

"A hopeful cartoonist," Chet corrected him.

Richards looked down at the strips laid out on his desk. "Striking art, good dialog, intricate plotting. You're going to be a very successful one. I can tell."

"I wish I could get some editors to agree with you."

"You will -- as soon as you get the proper hero. Right now all your villains are outwitting the police. That doesn't happen very often in real life." Richards shrugged. "However, that's neither here nor there. What I need to know is: are you willing to draw another crime adventure?"

"I suppose so," replied Chet. "But how will that help?"

"Simple," said Richards. "In this strip, you'll choose the only furrier in town who's licensed to import sables from Russia. And, just in case our friend has any trouble figuring out who you're writing about, you'll draw in the street sign and the address.

"And then what?"

"And then invite our culprit for dinner, or a drink, or to listen to the baseball game, and make sure the strip's laying around where he can see it, and at some point during his visit, find an excuse to leave the room for five minutes."

"What if the strip's still there after he leaves?" asked Chet.

"Then it means that he's got a good memory -- which is possible, since he didn't steal the jewelry strip -- or else it means that I'm going to be wasting a lot of your time and the taxpayers' money."

Chet shrugged. "I'm willing to try it if you are."

Richards withdrew a card from his wallet and handed it to the cartoonist. "Call me at this number as soon as you know he's seen the strip and left your apartment."

"I will, Officer Richards," said Chet, getting to his feet.

"Oh, one more thing, Mr. Gould," said Richards.

"Yes?"

"What's our suspect's name?"

"His real name is Melvin Head, but he likes to be called Nimrod. I gather that's his middle name."

"Melvin Nimrod Head," mused the policeman. "Doesn't ring a bell." Suddenly he smiled. "Mel N. Head. Melonhead. Maybe you ought to write him into your strip."

"It's a thought," agreed Chet.

* * * *

He drew the strip -- three weeks' worth -- that night, and invited Nimrod over the next afternoon.

The police staked out the furrier the same evening. For two nights nothing happened, but the third night Nimrod showed up, sneaking in through the back entrance, just as Chet had drawn it, and Richards was waiting for him.

* * * *

The next morning there was a knock at Chet's door. The cartoonist got up from his drawing board, walked over, and opened it.

"Good morning, Mr. Gould," said Richards, stepping into the apartment. "I just dropped by to tell you that we apprehended your friend Nimrod in the act of robbing the furrier. When we found the comic strip in his coat pocket he confessed to all three crimes."

"Wonderful!"

"Actually, I should have known not to waste my time the first two nights," added Richards with a rueful

smile.

"Oh?"

The policeman nodded. "To lend verisimilitude, you dated your strips."

"All cartoonists do," answered Chet. "That way all the papers run the same strip on the same day."

"Well, the day the actual break-in began in your strip was a Thursday..."

"...and last night was Thursday night!"

"Right," said Richards. "Poor Melonhead never had an original thought in his life. He not only needed you to show him how to rob a store, but he even had to be told what day to do it."

"Fascinating!" mused Chet.

"Commonplace," said Richards with a shrug. "You should see some of the really strange criminals I've had to bring in."

"I'd love to."

"You'd love to what?" asked Richards, confused.

"I'd love to talk to you from time to time about your work."

"You'd probably find it deadly dull."

"Not at all. In fact, I've decided to go back to working on my crime strip again." He grimaced. "I never did like funny animals."

"Well," said Richards, after giving the matter some thought, "if you really think it might help you..."

"I'm sure it would," said Chet. "Also, I've been thinking about what you said in your office the other day, about the strip needing a hero. What's your first name?"

"Tracy," said Richards. "But if you're going to pattern a cop after me, don't use my real name. The guys down at the station would tease me from now until Doomsday."

"Whatever you say."

"Also, don't use your friend Melonhead until after his trial. A good lawyer could claim you were prejudicing the jury."

"What a pity," replied Chet. "It was such a good name."

"Why not call him Pruneface?" suggested Richards. "It comes to the same thing, and this way some shyster won't put him back on the streets because of your new strip."

"All right," agreed Chet. "Though I hasten to point out that I haven't even written my new strip, let alone sold it."

"I have confidence in you, Mr. Gould," said Richards. "If you can draw a comic strip convincingly enough to trap Melonhead, you can draw one that editors will want to buy."

"I hope you're right," said Chet.

"I know I am." Richards looked at his watch. "I've got to be going. Melonhead was just a small fry. This week I'm after the biggest of the big boys."

"Big Boy," repeated Chet. "That would make a nice name for a villain, wouldn't it?"

"There's nothing nice about this particular villain, I assure you," said Richards grimly, as he opened the door and prepared to leave.

"Good luck," said Chet.

"Thanks. I have a feeling I'll be needing it."

Then he was gone, and Chet walked back to the drawing board. He looked at what he had done, crumpled it in a ball, and threw it in the wastebasket. Then he began outlining the panels for the first day of his new strip.

"Tracy Richards, Tracy Richards," he mused.

And then, carefully, meticulously, he began lettering the masthead:

THE ADVENTURES OF DICK TRACY.

-- The End --