

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Seeing Is Believing

RON FEWSMITH WAS ABOUT to rob a bank.

Armed only with a color Palm Pilot.

In person, not virtually.

Pausing momentarily outside the heavy glass doors of Merchants' Trust, Fewsmith mentally ticked off the steps in his plan again. Recollections from a hundred heist films interrupted, racing across his cinemaphile's brain. But as customers bustled past him, intent on doing their business this bright Monday morning, Fewsmith broke his reverie, realizing he shouldn't dawdle too long in this spot, lest he attract attention. Still, he hesitated a moment longer, highlighting the stages of his scheme.

He felt assured about all aspects involving the human element. Long months of diligent experimentation had left him confident that no individual in the bank would offer him any resistance, so long as he held firmly to his little Digital Assistant and remained free to deploy it. In fact, events should transpire so smoothly that no employee of the bank would realize that a robbery was even in progress. Only reconciliation of the day's transactions later that night would reveal a shortage of cash. And by then Fewsmith would be safely home, untraceable.

No, his only risk lay in the security cameras. The cameras made him sweat. There was no way that he could alter the images recorded by these monitors. Hence his disguise and adopted persona.

Fewsmith wore a large handlebar mustache reminiscent of one a nineteenth-century pugilist might have favored. Colored contacts altered his eyes. His clothing betokened some recent immigrant to these shores, perhaps a rube from the Balkans or outermost Albania. And his burlesque accent had been practiced for days.

Thus armed and accoutered Fewsmith felt, on the whole, confident of success. So: no more hesitation over this highly practical debut of his invention. Into the bank!

After joining the short line of customers standing more or less patiently in the chute of velvet ropes, Fewsmith quickly advanced to lead position. When called by the next available teller, Fewsmith put on a big smile and strode boldly forward.

The teller -- a young pimple-faced fellow wearing a clip-on tie instinctively smiled back. "How can I help you, sir?"

Fewsmith removed a sheaf of tattered foreign currency from his pocket and plopped it on the counter. "You change?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir, you'll have to see one of our customer service reps for that."

"No understand. Please to use translator."

Fewsmith proffered the Palm Pilot and the clerk reluctantly took it.

"Is this like some kind of computer dictionary? What do I do?"

"Push button here."

The teller depressed the indicated control.

Instantly a series of whirling alien glyphs, phantasmagorical in their variety and motions, flooded the color screen. When these icons cleared they were followed by a compressed digital movie, flickering at a subliminal rate. Fewsmith had carefully crafted the loop out of snippets from an old industrial training film that depicted stacks of cash being removed from a drawer and passed through a teller's slot.

The clerk seemed staggered for a millisecond by this mini-movie, but quickly recovered, his faculties apparently undisturbed. "I'm sorry, sir, but this screen's blank. Your machine must be broken."

Handing the device back, the teller reached into his cash drawer and removed a half-dozen fat stacks of banded cash. His hands seemed to be operating independently of his consciousness, as if two separate personalities shared his brain and body. The effect was disconcerting even to Fewsmith, who had witnessed it before.

Passing the money to Fewsmith, the teller said, "Thank you, sir. Have a nice day."

