

## **Justification by Works**

by

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(based on COTY)

(with apologies to the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen)

There were papers on the table, spilling out of their manila folders like grains of salt from an upset cellar. He reached over to shepherd them back into place; a name caught his eye. "You must be joking."

"I never joke, Arthur. You know that."

"Well - "

She raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"Preston? Of all the people in the Empire, Preston?"

A nod, slow and inexorable as the tide.

"Why? For heaven's sake - there isn't a single thing that qualifies the man for the League!"

"Isn't there? You've got the papers. Look at them."

"I am looking." He shook the documents at her. "All right, the man has a certifiable Wonder Dog. That's hardly a reason for-"

"I am not speaking of the dog," she said, quietly enough that he had to strain to hear. "While the animal has capabilities well beyond any normal Malamute hybrid, I agree with you. The dog is not the reason."

"Well, what is, then?" he burst out. "Wimsey - that I understood. You couldn't ask for a better backer, the man's as solid as investors come. The Americans make perfect sense. I've read what's out there. Swift makes Edison look like a bloody patent thief, and Danner's record from the War speaks for itself. That Cranston person-"

"The Shadow-"

"Yes, yes, him. . . he's a useful sort, I suppose, the League might have to get its hands dirty and you can't ask for better than someone who knows rotten hearts from the inside out. And he's got all of those contacts. How you intend to get him to agree to serve the King I don't want to know. I'm assuming it involves Wimsey's money."

Her lips curled upwards in something not unlike a smile.

"But I don't want to know," he continued hurriedly. "As for the Poppins woman-"

"Someone's got to look after the girl."

"And who better than a qualified nanny," he said. "A bit more qualified than most."

"Practically perfect."

"Ye-ees. . . look, that's not the point, Miss Poppins will do brilliantly and I'm sure she'll be able to keep a crew this motley in line with less effort than it'd take me to recite the bones of the skull. The point is - they all make sense." He rapped the papers in his hand sharply against the table. "Sergeant Preston does not."

She watched him silently, expression shading from amusement into something very close to condescension. "Arthur," she said at last, "page four, please."

He turned the pages. "Names of people he's arrested who've confessed. Standard work for any policeman. Rather a longer list than most his age, but-"

"Page five."

"Letter of apology from the jailor in Forty Mile."

"For mistaken identity and wrongful arrest, yes. Page six."

"Commendation from the United States Marine Corps and an honorary gunnery sergeant's rank. I'm not seeing anyth-"

"Arthur, if you do not take the time to read the man's file properly, you cannot be expected to understand."

"What is there to understand? The man's a thief-taker! He runs down the scum of the North Country! Any fool with a dog sled could do that!"

"True," she said, coming to her feet and circling slowly around the end of the table. "Once, twice, fifty times, perhaps. It doesn't take much to be a thief-taker. . . but that is not where the Sergeant's talent lies. I doubt he even realises it himself."

"Then - pray - enlighten me." It was an effort on his part to force his jaws apart and speak the sentence clearly.

"His record speaks for itself, Arthur. Ninety out of a hundred of his catches confessed - without coercion of any sort. Some of them even thanked him for pulling them from the criminal path before they'd gone beyond saving. Thanked the man who arrested them! When has that ever happened?" She shook her head, indicating a paper he'd missed. "This, from the provincial authorities; Preston talked an entire war party of Natives down from slaughtering every last man in a logging camp. This, from the Marines; the Americans lent them to him as aid to smash one of the biggest criminal operations in the North Country. He talked his way out of jail, Arthur - despite being found in the snow with stolen money in his pocket and the only gun for a hundred miles that could have committed the murder. He talked Indians out of war. He talks criminals into confessing and being glad they've done it. He's convinced the most suspicious, hard-bitten, cynical Yukon tradesmen that hiring ex-convicts was good business. . ."

"Good Lord, you're not saying he's a - a confidence man?"

She snorted, an incredibly undignified sound. "Have some sense, man," she

snapped. "Of course he's not. Have you no eyes? Everything he's done is legitimate - one hundred per cent. He's never brought the wrong man in - never. He doesn't make that kind of mistake. . . and people know it."

He turned the thought over in his head. "There are other policemen with perfect records," he volunteered.

She shook her head again. "It isn't the perfect record, it's how he got it. Don't you understand? People trust him - innately. People who have no reason to trust him do so anyway. Hardened criminals tell him their plans; his records all say the same thing, that they assume it won't hurt, that they'll have him dead soon. They haven't succeeded yet. Novice criminals? They spill their guts to him. They know he'll do them right in the eyes of the law. People who haven't yet taken up the gun? They turn to him - or when he comes down on them, they ask him for help, because they'd rather have his words than their own plans. The jailor in Forty Mile gave him the kind of chance at proving his innocence no sane officer of the law would; he said it was only humoring Preston's head wound, but when you look at his record. . ."

The commendation from the States caught his eye. "'Tell it to the Marines,'" he quoted softly.

"Just so, Arthur. Just so. People believe Preston. People believe in him. Canadians, French Canadians, Americans- Indians- all of them. When he speaks, people listen, and when they listen, they believe."

He thumbed the papers thoughtfully, frowning a little.

"Preston is an honest man," she said then. "Honest men don't last long in this world. This one has- despite a thousand efforts to bring him down. He's never been successfully framed. His reputation has never once been tarnished. People believe Sergeant Preston, Arthur. Bluntly put - if he says a thing, it will be believed."

"Anything?" he asked.

She smiled, like the cat that knows it's won its fight.

"Bloody Hell, woman, that's dangerous."

"Especially since he won't talk unless he believes what he's saying is right."

"Even worse. Why are you taking this kind of chance? How many things might he find out, if he ever stopped to look for them?"

"He doesn't know his own strength," she said simply. "Sergeant Preston, too, believes that he is a thief-taker. Perhaps the finest in all Canada, but a thief-taker nonetheless. Why would anyone take particular note of anything he said? If keeping his silence is for the betterment of law and order, then he'll keep it, and if it's not - well, we are talking about the League here. The Sergeant is a sensible man. Stories of the League sound like the brainsick tales of fevered children,

rather than news. He won't speak because he won't believe. Or if he does, he won't speak because he won't think anyone will believe."

"Still. . ." He faltered.

"I assure you, Arthur," she said, "Sergeant Preston is trustworthy. We have nothing to fear from him."

Exhaling, he nodded. "Oh, very well," he conceded, "I suppose I can understand that. What are we going to tell him, though?"

She shrugged. "Make something up, if you like. It's not as if you have to go far. Willpower, daring, honesty- sheer blind pigheaded stubbornness, he does always get his man-

"I like that one."

"All right, then. Stubbornness it is. Are we done here?"

"Yes. . . yes, I think so."