

WHO MURDERED MRP ?

AN INDUSTRIAL MYSTERY

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The events are TRUE. The names have been changed to protect the innocent.

The Case So Far: For five exciting issues hard boiled private eye Conrad Sultant has been hot on the trail of the MRP Killer who stalks the corridors of ACME Widget Co. No clue has gone unnoticed. No suspect has escaped his dragnet. Not only have ACME's key manufacturing managers been under his interrogation spotlight, but MRP itself has been under his magnifying glass. He's sifted the clues and analysed the evidence.

He's dodged the red herrings and the tearfully innocent advances of the most seductive suspect since Mata Hari - the alluring Miss Purr Chasing. But like they say, it ain't over till the Fat Lady sings. For Conrad Sultant, that could only mean one thing ...

Episode Six:

A Meeting at Midnight

Or: Move Over Mr.P.Body. Make Room for MRP.

I felt great. The night air in Havant was as stale as yesterday's news and the early editions were full of executive share option scandals. But, what did I care. The crease in my trousers was as sharp as my wit and no volume of verbal venom from the MD was going to knock the wind out of my investigative sails. He was 12 hours late. I was ready and waiting when he walked through the door.

"Great Caesar's Ghost, Mr. Sultant! What have you done to my boardroom," he roared, utterly alarmed at the state of the place. "I'm away two days and just look at this rubbish. Overdue Works Orders. Overdue Purchase Orders. Mismatched Orders Reports. Revised Capacity Plans. Short Lead Time Order Reports."

Yup, they were all there, all right. The diskettes and files that made my case, scattered just where I'd left them - across his board room table. He used his attach case with the Euro Star sticker on it to sweep my collection of empty coffee cups to the floor and laid his head wearily on the battle scarred mahogany. What I saw before me was as sorry a sight as you're likely to find this side of a fat cats pay review - a Managing Director in despair.

My mood was designer chipper. "How was Brussels," I asked him.

"Brussels!" The MD was barely able to stammer through his sudden, boiling rage. "Don't get me started. First, I arrive at a high level meeting to discuss the future of the European widget market, only to discover that Hezza's not even there! Some young whippersnapper named Lang is in the DTI chair now. All he seems interested in his handing out hotel vouchers and financial pledge cards. Then, when I find out over cocktails that there's a widget mountain the size Mont Blanc on the continent, Lang has the audacity to refuse a subsidy for the shut down of UK production. So, with the widget future about as bleak as a Yorkshire winter, I leave in a huff, only to have the train break down in the tunnel. Wrong kind of Frogs on the line, if you can believe that. Finally, I arrive back here and what do I find? A production line gone silent and my factory shut down. What, in the name of the supposed recovery, is going on here, Mr. Sultant? More to the point - where the heck is my MRP killer?"

Normally that kind of tirade from an irate client would have me reaching for my .38. But I'd been at ACME for five issues now and I could appreciate the kind of tension that's inherent in a full scale MRP investigation. It's all part of the territory.

"Sorry to hear about the Frogs," I said, by way of calming the MD down. "But your worries are over."

If I had a pipe, I'd have lit it for effect. I imagined a cloud of smoke drifting lazily from my Meerschaum, the aroma of expensive brandy rising enticingly from the snifter and the MD's cheque clearing nicely in my overdrawn account.

"The mystery is solved," I said. "Case closed."

The MD jumped to his black brogued feet and clapped his hands together like a kid on Christmas morning. You'd think he'd just got the widget contract for the Trident submarine. "Wonderful, Mr. Sultant. You've got the MRP killer!"

"I didn't say that," I clarified. "What I said was: Case closed."

The MD shot me a look like I'd just cancelled the contract. "Ummm," he pondered, with an uncharacteristic hesitance in his voice. "Are you telling me you've detained no one? That you haven't caught the killer after all?"

"Let's put it this way," I said. "I've had everyone who figures in this case hand in their security passes. They're all in their offices now, waiting for me to summon them to a little extra-ordinary production management powwow, if you catch my drift."

I really had him guessing. I shot him a conspiratorial wink that went a mile over his head and turned to the PC I had running on the table. I clicked once to minimise the game of Patience I was playing and typed out a quick E-mail message.

Inter Office Memo

To: Mr. Manu Facturing, Mr. Prod Uction, Master Engineer, Ms Fi Nance and Miss Purr Chasing.

From: Conrad Sultant, Private Eye

Subject: Who Murdered MRP?

Message: Just in case it's slipped your mind, there is a little matter of an MRP killer still on the loose. The pleasure of your esteemed company is requested in five minutes by the pallet of widgets at the foot of the steel stair on the production floor. Please be seated.

It was exactly 11:55 p.m. when I hit the 'Send' button. "OK. Follow me," I said to the MD as I picked up my battered brown valise. "We've got an appointment with an MRP killer."

The scene was just as it always is. The November air was damp and chilly. With Mickey dancing on 12 o'clock, the production floor was dark and silent. A single, dim light burned overhead, like the Transylvanian moon. Against the wall, at the foot of the steel stair leading to the Ivory Tower above, was a pallet load of widgets. Six straight-backed

chairs were arranged in a semicircle. In the first five, as stiff as life-sized Cluedo cards, sat my parade of expectant suspects.

First, was Mr. Manu Facturing. In his dark, dreary suit, he was totally motionless, as though strapped there expecting the punishment of a thousand volts to surge through his already rigid body.

Mr. Prod Uction looked despondent - as resigned to his fate as a blindfolded man who's been granted his last wish. Even the MD ignored his smouldering cigarette. What harm could it do him now?

And what of The Master - the greatest Engineer this side of the Chunnel? Slouched lethargically in his chair, his once Portilloed hair a dishevelled tangle, he seemed an empty shell - a PC without software, a man without a soul. His head rolled to one side, as though inviting the blade to drop and do its final deed.

Next to him sat Ms Fi Nance. She was cool all right. Ice cool. But behind the iron mask of a woman who always got what she wanted, lay the truth. She'd crunched one number too many. She knew it and I knew it and my old pal Pareto knew it, too. With her hair up and her throat bare, was she expecting the worst, accepting her fate? Or, was her haughty glare defying me to put the noose there?

Finally, my eyes fell upon the alluring innocent of the case - Miss Purr Chasing. Wow. The tousled blonde hair. The blue eyes as clear and pure as a mountain stream. The tiny, tentative pout. The tear-smudged mascara. I had to admit it. I'd fallen for her big time. But that was then, and this was now. I cleared my throat and my emotions and got ready to do what I do best - to tear away the mask of deception to reveal the truth and justice of the MRP way.

I gestured for the MD to take the last remaining seat and stepped into the circle of light cast from above. At my feet was a tattered tarpaulin laid out on the floor.

"J'Accuse," I said, quick and loud like a gun shot. My voice rang out and echoed in the dormant emptiness of the factory. Then I laughed.

"It's a joke," I said. But my five suspects didn't seem so sure. What the MD was thinking, even I couldn't imagine.

"Thank you all for coming," I said. "Isn't E-mail wonderful?"

The silence prevailed.

"OK," I said, never much for frivolity. "Enough light-hearted patter." I bent over and with the flourish of a New York barman mixing a dry martini, I whisked the tarpaulin aside. My suspects' collective gasp shattered the uneasy silence. What they saw, there by the pallet of widgets, was the faded white chalk outline of Mr. P. Body's corpse exactly where he'd fallen.

The MD spoke first. "Very well, Mr. Sultant. I can appreciate your little side show for what it is - cheap theatrics. Now, which one of these managers is responsible for the deathly demise of my MRP system?"

Obviously, this was no time for subtlety. I hit him hard with it - the biggest truth off all. "You're the boss. You're the client. You call the shots and you sign the cheques. But, the blunt and honest truth is: It isn't your MRP system. It belongs to everyone and everyone on the manufacturing team has to do their bit to keep it alive and pumping. The reason ACME's MRP system is deader than a door nail is because the individual managers have worked against MRP discipline. Ain't it obvious by now?"

I gestured at the assembled managerial team. "They're all guilty!"

There was another collective gasp. Everyone, including the MD, remained frozen to their seat.

"As for cheap theatrics —" I paused with a shrug of my

shoulders, "— you might be right. But, as every consultant worth his retainer knows, the success of the lesson is determined by the impact of the presentation. So, without further ado..."

I reached into my valise. I pulled out a spanner and said —

"Mr. Manu Facturing."

I could see his eyes blinking furiously behind his coke bottle lenses. "You stand accused of Borrowing Capacity in your own selfish best interest. To maintain your supply of raw materials you had to kill off MRP to feed your maximum capacity habit. How do you plead?"

"Guilty," he said. "I admit it. I know I should concentrate on meeting MRP's demands, not my own. But I'm a maximum capacity junky..."

I let his wimpish alibi fade into the night as I turned to —

"Mr. Prod Uction."

He wasn't in his Ivory Tower now. He was right on the end of my accusatory finger and I had a message to get across. Out of my bag of props I drew my .38 revolver. "You stand accused of —" I drew the hammer back and spun the cylinder, "— Management Isolation. Proved beyond a shadow of a doubt by the Clue of Capacity Smoothing, first you took MRP output at face value without understanding why it wasn't what you'd expected. Second, you arrogantly thought that you were the only one capable of making a valuable input to your coveted Capacity Plan. If you'd listened to the foreman in the first place, not only would you have saved time, but he would have been more likely to take your Revised Capacity Plan seriously and MRP would be alive today. How do you plead?"

Prod Uction took it on his non-existent chin like a man. His grey personality flushed red with embarrassment. "Guilty," he said. "Maybe you've got a point, Mr. Sultant. Perhaps if I left the Ivory Tower for the factory floor more often and communicated effectively, MRP input would be more accurate and MRP output would be more respected."

Producing from my bag another suitably symbolic prop, I turned toward —

"The Master."

He knew his number was up. The knife I hefted nonchalantly in my hand said as much. "You stand accused of Cutting Corners. As proved beyond a shadow of a doubt by the Clue of the Long Time Ago Order, by focusing your attention only on your short term objective, you compromised the long term health of MRP and left it terminally poisoned with bad data. How do you plead?"

A Master of the Universe no longer, The Master had to admit it. "Guilty," he said. "And you're right, Mr. Sultant. There is no short cut to quality."

Next, I turned to confront —

"Ms Fi Nance."

I was going to love this. I reached into my bag, pulled out a length of rope and coiled it into a noose. "You stand accused of being a Control Freak. As proved beyond a shadow of a doubt by the Clue of the Long Overdue Order, arrogantly believing that you were the only manager acting in the company's best interest, you choked MRP to death by being a slave to unnecessary detail. How do you plead?"

Fi Nance was no slouch. The number crunchers never are. She looked at the noose dangling from my hand, then rose sharply to her feet. The smack of her hand as it struck my cheek was like the crack of a whip. Her "How dare you" echoed down the silent production line.

I was getting good at shrugging, so I did it again. Then, I dismissed her hot-headed, defiant outburst with two simple words — "Pareto's Principle." She raised her hand again, but

before she could let fly with another haymaker, the MD rang the bell.

"Sit down, Ms Fi Nance," he said sharply. "Contrary to what you may think, I rule the roost around here."

She did as she was told. I turned to face my final suspect —

"Miss Purr Chasing."

She tousled her hair again to get just the right effect. Her eyelashes fluttered hopefully over her blue eyes. She dabbed, yet again, at the perpetual smudge of mascara. But for me, the seduction was over.

I bent to my bag and extracted my final prop - the lead pipe. I imagined it landing with a casual, startling clang on the cement floor before her. But, I couldn't do it. I put the pipe back in the bag and said, with as much gruff nonchalance as I could muster, "You stand accused of Non-compliance. Quite simply, as proved beyond a shadow of a doubt by the Clue of the Missing Free Issue, first you ignored MRP in favour of doing as Manu Facturing requested. Second, when MRP output didn't make sense to you, you persuaded Prod Uction to disregard it. Non-compliance is a cancer that kills MRP. How do you plead?"

"Guilty," she whispered. "I understand now what you're saying, Mr. Sultant. In MRP, you have to understand what is wrong. You can't just ignore a problem and hope it'll go away, because it won't."

I looked at her carefully. The smudge of mascara was gone and with it the veil of ignorance. I finally believed she was telling the truth. She did understand.

The MD was on his feet. He had his cheque book out and was starting to write zeros. As far as he was concerned, the investigation was closed. Except, in case you haven't noticed, for one niggling detail.

Right on cue, looking like Howard Hughes with a hangover, he emerged from behind that damn pallet of widgets and walked back onto the factory floor. Miss Purr Chasing's scream was the kind you hear when the knife tears through the shower curtain in Psycho. Prod Uction coughed hard on his ciggy. And the MD's jaw dropped like shares on budget day.

"Mr. P. Body," he said. "But you were locked safely away in —"

"— the executive freezer." I completed the sentence.

"How did you know," stammered the MD. "What gave it away?"

To explain it, I had to take them all back 48-hours, to the night I finally put the pieces of the MRP murder together.

"With the MD in Brussels," I began, "I faced an ultimatum. Find the MRP killer or get off the case. So, what did I have so far? "Well, I'd uncovered a devastating catalogue of MRP shenanigans. But, I was getting nowhere fast in my quest for Mr. P. Body's murderer. "OK. What was it the MD had said before heading off to Brussels? '*I want my MRP killer!*' And that got me thinking. Quite literally, wasn't that what he'd been demanding all along? Not Mr. P. Body's killer, but MRP's killer?"

United in purpose, ACME's manufacturing management team leaned forward in their chairs. They'd been duped too, just like me. Now, they deserved the truth. So I continued.

"Why, then, was the MD so intent upon finding out who'd killed his MRP system when there was a real live killer on the loose? Answer: Or — was there?"

I gestured at the chalk outline on the floor. "OK, I may have seen a body, but it was only for a second. Why was it still warm when MD had it whisked away to the morgue? And,

when I searched the scene, why was there no gun, no knife, no rope or lead pipe or spanner to be found? Why was there no weapon? And, why was there no sign of a struggle?"

"Finally, why did all of my clues, from the first instance of Borrowed Capacity right through to the Missing Free Issue, all point irrefutably to an MRP disaster and not to a real life murder?"

"Because there wasn't one!" said Miss Purr Chasing.

"Precisely. That's when I decided to do a little more snooping. After all, who was going to stop me? The factory was shut down and as far as I knew at the time, completely empty. While I wandered around the deserted plant, I struggled to remember the vital bit of testimony that might be the clue I was looking for. Suddenly, as I was passing the 'Closed For Renovation' sign outside the executive canteen, I remembered.

"It was something the MD'd said to me in the executive toilets, way back when I was wading through Long Overdue Orders. Mr. P. Body's remains were '*cluttering up the deep-freeze in the executive canteen*', he'd said."

"And that's just where he found me," injected Mr. P. Body. "I'd been in there all along. Hiding out in the shut down freezer on the MD's orders. On double time and a half, it was a nice little earner I couldn't refuse."

"So," said Miss Purr Chasing brightly. She was getting the hang of this detective stuff and there was no stopping her now. "In reality, no body was murdered. Just MRP!"

"That's it in the proverbial nutshell," I said. "The MD faked Mr. P. Body's murder to create a cover for my investigation of ACME's failing MRP system."

"Which I might add," the MD interrupted a bit too smug for my liking, "should be well on its way to complete recovery. Providing, that is, that my management team takes heed of what they've learned from Mr. Sultant's investigation."

The MD signed his cheque. I took it and another look at Miss Purr Chasing and left the premises.

My roof had been fixed. My desk top was dry. The office door was open and I could see the guy putting the finishing touches on the new paint job. My name was still there, but he'd scraped off the 'Private Eye' and replaced it with something more appropriate — MRP Consultant.

Some habits die hard, though. When the phone rang I grabbed it on the second hop. It was the States. The guy on the line sounded desperate.

"OK," I said. "Let me ask you a couple of preliminary questions. Why don't you believe your MRP output is correct?"

His reply was nothing but a disjointed garble of figures.

"... hundreds of Overdue Orders."

"... percentage of Short Lead Time Orders."

I held the phone away from my ear and said, "Calm down, Mr. Ford. Remember, MRP is really just a big, fancy calculator. If something goes wrong with a calculator, who's to blame? Whoever pushed the wrong buttons. If I take your case, I'll be asking one big question — *Why?* I'll want to know *why* your MRP output is not what you expected. And I'll want to know *why* you don't believe in it. Every time you open your mouth I'll ask you *why*, *why* and *why* again - until I have your MRP killer nailed to the wall. Oh yeah, and one other thing. My fee doesn't include expenses."

The line went silent while he thought about it. "I need you *yesterday*," he said finally.

I rang off and booked a flight for Detroit. Non-smoking.

THE END.