

THE CASE OF THE PERFECT PANGRAM

ROBERT N. TEST
Cincinnati, Ohio

Inspector Ashley Halsey slammed down his copy of the newspaper as he heard a loud knock at the door of his tiny office. "Confound it," he muttered angrily. "Can't a man take a few minutes to finish solving a crossword puzzle!" Reluctantly, he swiveled his huge body in his chair to reach the doorknob.

"Well, if it isn't my old friend, Father Leo Noel! And how is everything at Saint Mary's Church these days?"

"Not too good, Inspector," replied the lanky priest as he ambled wearily to the desk and sat down on the corner. "Someone broke into the church last night and stole the gold tabernacle where the Blessed Sacrament is kept." The priest wiped his brow and continued, "He left a note telling me to contact you immediately, and that you had just twenty-four hours to solve the crime. I'm afraid if he isn't captured soon he'll melt the tabernacle and sell the gold. It's quite valuable."

"Don't worry, Father Noel, I'll find the thief. Just twenty-four hours? Then we must hurry to the scene of the crime."

The Inspector arose, and pulled a huge comb from his jacket. With a grunt he ran the comb through his unruly shock of red hair.

"That's an unusual comb, Inspector," remarked Father Noel. "Is it an antique?"

"Yes," answered Halsey. "My Irish grandfather gave it to me when I was a child. It was quite old even then - so old, in fact, they probably had a different spelling for it. Perhaps we can use it to 'comb' for clues, Father?"

The two men stood in silence as they stared at the altar. Nothing had been disturbed; a thin film of dust outlined the spot that had been occupied by the tabernacle. "What's this?" the Inspector murmured, picking up a short piece of hemp about the length of his little finger. "It looks like it came from a heavy ship's rope. Curious!"

"What do you think the rope means, Inspector?" asked the priest.

"I don't know yet," Halsey replied, "but there must be a tie-in somewhere. If you don't mind, Father, let's retire to the rectory to discuss the situation."

Inspector Halsey settled his two hundred and fifty pounds of Irish flesh and bone into the overstuffed parlor chair as Father Noel's housekeeper poured them tea. "Thank you, Mary," said the priest as she handed him a cup. After she had left the room, Father Noel whispered, "She's the best housekeeper I've ever had; we get along famously." As an afterthought, he added, "She's one of the Byram girls, you know - we have a lot in common."

"Do you have any known enemies - perhaps a disgruntled parishioner who wanted revenge of some sort?"

"No .. not that I know of, Inspector, unless .."

"Unless what?"

"A few days ago, a priest on sabbatical showed up unexpectedly on my doorstep, asking if he could stay here for awhile. I didn't like his looks, and when I later caught him rifling the poorbox I sent him packing. He called himself Father Wiles .."

"Father Wiles? Not Lewis Wiles?"

"Why, yes," replied Father Noel, "but how did you know?"

"Elementary, my dear Father. Wiles and I attended seminary together many years ago. We both thought then the priesthood was our calling, but it was not to be. I turned to the law, Wiles to crime."

"How unfortunate."

"He sometimes calls himself by the pseudonym Brother lshi, an anagram of 'I rob the rich'. He fancies himself a modern-day Robin Hood. Like me, he was addicted to all sorts of wordplay. In seminary we spent hours devising clever anagrams. However, our specialty was pangrams."

"Pangrams?"

"Yes," explained Halsey. "A pangram is a holo-alphabetic sentence - an attempt to compose a meaningful phrase using the 26 letters of the alphabet just once."

"You mean like 'The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy gray sow'? That type of thing?"

"Something similar, Father, but far more concise - and, I might add, more difficult. The construction of a perfect pangram is considered an impossibility by students of the English language. However, we pangrammists keep trying, butting our heads against a wall of words, so to speak. Wiles and I labored for months at a time, attempting to devise the world's most perfect pangram. He dreamed of getting into the Guinness Book of World Records. I think the strain was too much - his mind became unhinged, and he then turned to a life of crime."

"But why on earth would he steal our tabernacle?"

"That's the question, Father, that I intend to answer. We once promised each other that if either of us ever managed to construct

the perfect pangram, he would make it known to the other in some devious and clever manner. Can you tell me anything more about what Wiles said or did while he was here?"

In reply, Father Noel reached into his pocket and produced a snapshot. "I almost forgot - Father Wiles left this behind in his room. Do you think it might have some bearing on the missing tabernacle?" He passed the picture to the Inspector.

Taking out his magnifying glass, Inspector Halsey examined the photograph closely. "This is quite an elaborate set-up, Father. Look! There seems to be a map of Europe on the wall. If you look closely, you'll see that a certain area of Scandinavia is circled, one composed principally of grassy fields."

"Is that a violin, Inspector, lying on the table in front of the map?" asked Father Noel.

"Yes, it is. However, it seems to be a very old one. Notice here also, a strand of heavy rope, of a type used on ships. It's obvious that Wiles has stolen the tabernacle, and that he is challenging me with this picture to solve some sort of puzzle. Do you still have the note he left?"

Taking the crumpled paper from Father Noel, the Inspector held it up to the light. "I thought so," he mused. "There seems to be a faint indication of writing on the back. We used to send secret messages to each other in the Seminary using invisible ink. We made the ink from tea, and the writing could be made to appear with the application of heat!"

Striking a match, the Inspector held it a few inches below the note. Slowly, a message began to appear.

"Listen to this!" cried the Inspector. "'To my old friend, Inspector Ashley Halsey: As you have no doubt deduced by now, I have taken the tabernacle from Saint Mary's Church. Yes, Ashley, at last I, Brother Ichi, have devised the perfect pangram. As promised, I am letting you know what it is in a cryptic manner. I will return the tabernacle only if you can deduce my pangram within 24 hours after reading this note. If you ascertain it, I will bring the tabernacle to your office, and you can turn me over to the authorities for punishment. If you fail, I continue my life of crime. The photo I left behind contains all the clues you need to learn my pangram. To let me know you have solved it, publish the pangram in the local newspaper, giving me rightful credit as the author. Good hunting!'"

"The man is insane, Inspector," said Father Noel.

"Perhaps," replied the Inspector. "But he does have the cleverness of most madmen .. and word game players. I compare him to Professor Moriarty, the tormentor of Sherlock Holmes."

"One thing I don't understand. Why would he want to turn himself in if you find his pangram?"

"Because basically, Father, most criminals want to be caught.

Furthermore, Wiles is the type of individual who loves the excitement of the chase, like a fox who leads the pack of hounds along a false trail and dives into his lair to gloat over his triumph."

Hardly noticing the sound of the clock striking midnight, Inspector Halsey poured himself another cup of tea as he sat hunched over his desk. Picking up the photo for the thousandth time, he scrutinized it with his magnifying glass. "Hmm," he thought, "I didn't see this before. There seems to be a question mark written on the map's margin, and .. what's this? .. a comb protruding from under the violin. And those drawings on the map of Scandinavia - yes, they are tiny copies of the violin on the table!"

Excitedly, he pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and begin jotting down phrases. "I must think like Wiles. First, he stole the tabernacle, using a ship's rope to pull it from the altar. Then what did he do? Should I look in the grasslands of Scandinavia for hundreds of ancient violins? Should I go over the map with a fine-toothed comb, perhaps with my old one that he used to borrow? The tabernacle .. The ship's rope .. The question .. The old comb .. The ancient violins .. The Scandinavian grasslands .. Eureka! I have it!" cried the Inspector, jumping up quickly and spilling his tea across the desk.

Triumphantly, he wrote six words on the sheet of paper. Father Noel's tabernacle was saved; all he had to do now was incorporate the pangram in a short article for the newspaper telling of the burglary and its solution.

Late the following morning, after the first edition of the paper had appeared on the streets, Inspector Halsey and Father Noel impatiently waited in his office with the sheriff for the arrival of Wiles with the tabernacle.

"Do you think he'll actually show up?" asked the priest nervously.

"Have no fear, Father Noel, Wiles is as good as his word - he'll do it." A soft knock was heard at the door; it opened slowly and in walked Father Wiles holding the gold tabernacle in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Gently he laid the tabernacle down in front of the group. Turning to Inspector Halsey with a smile, he said "You won the game fair and square, old puzzle pal, but don't expect justice to prevail - I'll soon break out!" With a flourish, he thrust his wrists into the waiting handcuffs and was led away by the sheriff.

The Inspector shook his head slowly. "A genius," he murmured reverently. "Think what he could have accomplished if he had not turned to crime. Did you notice the sentence he uttered contained all the letters of the alphabet? Even if he never returns to word-play, he will always be remembered for his 26-letter pangram." The inspector and the priest gazed in awe at the alphabetic perfection of the cryptic message in the newspaper before them

PYX VANG QUIZ: KOMB CRWTH FJELDS?