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*It began with a series of blackmail letters demanding money. Then cans of poison-laced pet food began to appear on shelves in supermarkets around England. Later, a mother found herself spoon-feeding her baby from a jar of baby food when she noticed shards of razor blades in the child's mouth! How did this blackmailer always manage to stay one step ahead of the police? And how many innocent people would suffer until the police would finally apprehend him? Taken from the Scotland Yard archives, this was one of the most mysterious crimes in modern history.*

# *The London Blackmailer*



Leslie Simmons had no premonition of the upheaval that was awaiting him on the morning of August 3, 1988. He had worked for decades as manager of the Pedigree pet food company. This company, located 100 miles north of London in Melton Mowbray, is one of the largest pet food manufacturers in all England.

Arriving at the impressive structure and greeting the workers he passed, Simmons rushed to begin his day's work. He prepared the traditional British "cuppa" (tea) for himself, and began final preparations for the conference that would take place later that day.

Just as Simmons was enjoying his first sip, the secretary knocked on his door. She brought in a small package and laid it down on his massive mahogany desk. The moment Simmons set eyes on that package he got a bad feeling in his stomach. A quick check of the outside revealed that the name and address of the sender were conspicuously absent. He opened the parcel with nimble fingers. A chill ran down his back when he laid eyes on the contents.

Inside the package was a can of Pedigree's pet food, together with a note. The letter stated that the food in the can was laced with a highly poisonous chemical that is both odorless and colorless. It cannot be easily detected, but is deadly nonetheless.

The note demanded a payment of £100,000 (about \$180,000) annually, for the next five years. If the payments were not made exactly on schedule, a large number of the company's cans with the killer chemical would begin to appear on store shelves countrywide.

Using blackmail against large companies is nothing new. But Simmons had a gut feeling that this time was different. More often than not the blackmailer is caught through one method or another when he comes to pick up his payment.

This blackmailer, however, had included exact details of how the money was to be deposited in a bank account

that he would first reveal later. He would be able to withdraw the money whenever he was ready, using a bank card at one of the thousands of ATM machines around the country. It would be impossible to catch him.

The blackmailer clarified in his letter that he had already opened the bank account years before under a false identity. The cards and PIN numbers he was issued with the account were sent to a post office box in a busy postal center. There was no chance at all that one of the workers might recall someone they had dealt with one time many years before.

"When the company decides that it agrees to pay, you will put a classified in the *Daily Telegraph* [a popular London newspaper] that reads: "Happy Birthday Sam, Best Wishes Bill." The advertisement must be placed no later than September 1."

It seems that the letter writer had found a way to avoid every known method of tracing blackmailers....

Simmons fell back in his armchair, feeling weak. He was well aware of what it would do to the company if the blackmailer carried out his threat. All his hard work for the past three decades to build up the quality of Pedigree's products and earn customer loyalty and trust would be undermined literally overnight.

Images of the major lawsuits clients would bring against Pedigree for killing their beloved household pets began to swim before Simmons' eyes. Sales would plummet and Pedigree would be forced to announce an expensive recall. Reduced sales would also mean massive layoffs....

The manager called an emergency meeting with John Dale, his sales director, and William Duncan, chief of public relations. They worked feverishly to come up with a plan to counter this new and very real threat to their company.

Simmons repeatedly warned his underlings that the matter had to be kept secret. The police certainly had to be informed, but under no circumstances could they come down in person to the premises. The moment the employees became aware

that something was amiss the matter could leak to the press and the entire public would become wary of Pedigree products.

As manager, Simmons was particularly concerned about avoiding any tarnish to Pedigree's name. The slightest loss of trust could undermine the company and would be nearly impossible to rectify. He was also worried that if the criminal became aware that the police had been brought in he would be even more likely to carry out his threat.

There was no opportunity to meet with detectives for at least another half hour, so all Simmons could do was bite his nails. He tried to collect his thoughts and calculate what his first response should be, but it was hard to push out those negative thoughts. Dale and Duncan kindly offered to take charge so he could go on with the other work at hand. Simmons accepted and the meeting ended.

Dale and Duncan rushed to the parking lot of a nearby shopping center where they had made up to meet with Detective Robert McDougal, commander of the criminal investigation unit of the local police force.

McDougal's tall frame and head full of grey hair mirrored his 40 years of experience in the police force. He listened closely to the information the two executives provided and then carefully read the letter. He was shocked. "A real professional. It's just as if he knew exactly what we would be thinking and planning. It's impossible to tell from this letter who he is. But it is possible that we will learn more from forensics."

McDougal brought the letter and cans of pet food to the police forensic laboratory. Then he waited nervously to hear what the testing would turn up. An hour later, Duncan's phone rang. "Hello, this is Robert McDougal," the voice on the other end of the line introduced itself.

"So, did they come up with anything?"

"No, I'm afraid not. The chemical is exactly as described in the letter. It is undetectable but very dangerous. The letter itself gave us no clues. This type of paper is used all over the country every day. He also used a popular type of

printer and sent us a Xerox of the original letter so there wouldn't be any fingerprints to go by. He even used water to moisten the stamp instead of licking it. There is absolutely nothing for us to go on to launch an investigation."

A few days later, Duncan and Dale again met with Officer McDougal in a warehouse where they could review the details of the case. "We have decided that the company will not give in to the blackmailer," Dale informed the officer. "We cannot let ourselves be dictated to by an underworld criminal."

"That is not a wise decision," the detective replied. "We have to recognize that we are dealing with a very dangerous person and we have absolutely no evidence to lead us to him—or them, as the case may be. If he will write again, we will have no choice but to deposit the money in the given bank account and then wait to see what will happen. That may be our only chance of establishing contact with him. Eventually, he will probably make some mistake and we will be able to nab him."

According to protocol, police departments had to inform the higher authorities any time a blackmail case came up. McDougal had dutifully reported the Pedigree incident to Scotland Yard. Although McDougal remained at the head of the investigation—or lack of it—he traveled to Scotland Yard headquarters to meet with Patrick Fleming,



Pedigree products on store shelves.