

# Unthieving

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If you happened to be wandering the streets of New York City in 1932, dodging your way in and out of the busy crowd, you wouldn't have noticed Leon Halter, even if he had bumped right into you. In fact, that was the idea. A gentle graze of your shoulders meeting may be all you'd notice of him as he shuffled past. Leon could usually be seen wearing a heavy, wool coat, his head turned down showing his dark-brown shaggy hair, a thin beard always showing, covering his cheeks and chin, his deep brown eyes peeled to the street below his feet. Leon was a forgettable man to say the least. That is, until you arrived at your home and noticed a few of your last dollars missing, and you'd try and search your mind, try and remember the man who brushed shoulders with you but, as so many found, their minds were blank. Little did they know that Leon was in fact the greatest thief the world had ever seen. Like many successful thieves in history, Leon had to credit circumstance to some of his success, but it was his rules, his system that set him apart.

The part of his fortune that could be attributed to mere circumstance wasn't one that was hard to understand during Leon's day. It hadn't quite been three years since people had lost their faith. It wasn't their faith in their leaders, or neighbors, or humanity, or even God that they had lost. It was their faith in their money, or more specifically, in the people who held their money. The entire world, it seemed, had been tossed into the gutter by the depression, each man as poor as the next, each soul as hungry and deprived as the one at its side. Not a scrap was spared, not a morsel unaccounted for during those days. But unlike most, sad times these were not for Leon. For through his pilfering, his poaching, his pinching, his pirating, his plundering, and his pillaging of an entire city of their possessions, Leon Halter lived a life of comfort and ease.

Now, it may be strange to think of a thief living so well during a time in which so many were poor. When so many had so little to steal, when so few could still live a life of luxury. The natural thought would be, how could a thief have anything to steal? And up to this point in history, you would be correct in asking. But the impoverished neighbors around him provided him the exact circumstances where a thief like Leon could not only get along, but thrive. So many had lost their faith in the places that held their hard-earned dollars, many more had lost their homes and wandered the streets having all

their possessions with them. Now, this set of circumstances lead us to the logical question of, where do people keep their money if not in banks and they have no homes? Simple deduction lands their final dollars and cents to lie in their pockets, right along with pictures of family, identification and, more often than not, one of Leon's hands. With this environment all around him, Leon had the choice of any pocket in the city for his funds for living to flow from. Indeed it was a good place and time for his occupation to thrive.

While these conditions provided him the fountain necessary to draw his wealth from, it was his rules that set him apart from the common thief during this time. It was these that Leon considered to make him a cut above the rest; it was these that separated him from any other thief in history. There were only four that he followed, but they were his religion, his creed, and they were what governed his life. A little self control can go a long way in the life that is lived off the scraps of others. These rules, Leon believed, could make any two-bit hack of a burglar into as great of a thief as he was. They were as follows:

1. Never take more than what can be forgotten: This was Leon's first and foremost of any of the rules that he had imposed on himself. It was the largest reason he had been so successful for such a long time. Many of those who were considered the "greatest" thieves throughout history were regarded so because they stole large, expensive, irreplaceable things. Many of these men were also caught throughout the ages, and it was a simple flaw in their thinking as Leon saw it.

If you stole a work of art, a diamond, or a vault full of cash someone was going to miss it, someone was going to report it, someone was going to come after you and, sadly, more often than not, someone (being the thief) was going to prison...or worse. But if one followed this particular rule and stole only things that its owners would pass off as nothing, as something that must have slipped through the cracks of their lives, then the item was lost forever and was to be owned entirely by the thief. The exhausting process of running, of hiding, of stashing the goods, was completely eliminated, and the item was fully owned; one hundred percent transference from owner's pocket into Leon's. Stealing one's possessions was such a tricky task, but stealing the memories that go along with an item, now that is entirely impossible. Best to stick to the things people never knew they had for sure to begin with.

2. Never take from those who need what little they have: Now this rule may seem hard to follow in a time like the one Leon lived in but, in the reality of daily life, it wasn't difficult. Noticing the difference between those who were down on their luck and those who would die if they went without a meal or two was a skill one learned over time and perfected as a craft of the trade. At first, one only noticed the obvious signs—men and women with sunken-in faces, a look of desperation in their dull eyes, wisps of hair blowing into their expressionless faces. These were the individuals who were eyeing the end, and it was painfully obvious to avoid these.

Now, Leon was no saint, but he did have a soft spot towards these destitute souls and, on occasion, he would slip a coin or two into their pockets as he passed by. Frankly, he found this act of adding to one's pockets to be just as simple as taking things out after he got a knack for it. The reason for these good acts wasn't for some Robin Hood-like idea of grandeur, nor was Leon attempting to make a run for sainthood. No, he simply looked at these acts as any businessman would, as an investment and, like any investment, he hoped it would pay in interest with time. Give a poor man a dime for a fishing pole, and Leon may one day be able to steal a fish or two someday.

As time passed, he began being able to pick out not only the desperately poor, but also those who were doing better amongst the masses. A tell-tale sign—their shoes. One's shoes is always one of the many things to be set aside in terms of expense, but always one of the first to be replaced once people had a dollar or two to their name. Leon never fully understood why. Maybe shoes were one of the fixtures in people feeling a sense of normalcy once again. Maybe walking in worn-in shoes all day was one of the largest annoyances any could have. Leon didn't know the exact reasoning, and didn't care. All he knew was that if he saw someone with a new pair of shoes walking towards him, it was likely their shoulders would meet in passing.

3. It's not stealing, it's borrowing: This was less a rule and more a creed by which Leon lived his life. Though in a debate he would eventually admit that indeed he was stealing, he truly believed to himself that one day he would be able to give it all back, that he was only borrowing from the house right now, and eventually he'd be able to break even with everything he had taken. It was because of this that he was able to live with himself every day, how he slept

with a clean conscience every night his eyes shut. He knew one day everything would be made right and he'd be able to end his life in balance, even though with everyday that passed, the debt he owed grew and grew. At times, Leon thought long and hard about if he'd ever truly be able to make things right, or if this was all just a lie he told himself to get through another day.

4. For God's sake, do not have a "character": If there was one aspect of the competition in his industry that truly caused frustration for Leon, it dealt with this final rule. Leon didn't know why, but for some reason, all the eccentric idiots seemed to flock to his line of work and did nothing but make fools of themselves. Tarnishing what was otherwise a respectable business.

They all wanted to be well-known for their acts, to be famous. The twits. If someone's walking down the street, which of the two would be the most logical to stand out: a man in casual dress and staring at his feet as they hit the pavement, or a tall man with a cane and maroon top-hat? Which are they likely to remember when describing to the authorities who had taken their pocket watch? Being famous does nothing but cause problems in the thieving trade, and wearing a fake eye patch, walking with a hobble, and having a fake arm isn't going to help anything but land you in jail quicker.

This was one of the largest reasons that Leon knew he was the best in the world. Anonymity was a sign of success, and the only person in the world who even knew of his existence was his protégé, Lucy. Having stolen for a lifetime and only having one soul to know of you speaks for one's track record. And Leon's was spotless.

For years, Leon had followed these rules to the tee, never questioning, never faulting, and he taught Peg to do much the same. It wasn't until today, when Peg had shown him her latest loot of the day that he knew he had to do something. For though she couldn't possibly have understood, she had no way of knowing what she had done, she had broken the most important rule of all. Leon knew he would have to set it right, to show her how important a simple possession like the one she held in her small hand could be. As she held it up to the golden sunlight, watching the way it glimmered in the window, he knew he would have to be the one to pay the

price for her mistake.

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Relatively, it hadn't been that long since Leon had first met Peg and, from that first night, he knew she was something special. She was something he would want to protect, to take care of, and to teach for as long as he was able. Before, Leon had worked, traveled, and lived alone. He figured that lifestyle made for less people that could one day turn him in, and staying a free man was always the most important thing in his life. But the night he found Peg changed all that.

It had always been Leon's strategy to move from place to place, never stealing from one part of the city for too long. He knew if he stayed in one spot that eventually someone would mention to another that their change kept disappearing, the second person would agree to having had much the same feeling, and eventually a man-hunt would ensue of the change-lifter. Leon had long since decided to avoid this ordeal entirely and, once more, thanks to the environment, finding vacant places to sleep was never difficult. It seemed the city was filled with more empty apartments than anyone could ever stay in during a lifetime. After around a two week period, Leon would simply take with him what he chose and head out in search of a new abandoned roof to lay his head under.

It was on one of these nights, when Leon was in search of a new home that everything would change for him. It was a cold, January night, one where the wind sweeps up the snow from the pavement and twirls it through the streets like a fog slowly rolling through the town in waves. Leon had been without shelter for a day or so by that point and was happy to find a building with the front door ajar, the warmth from inside spilling out into the street, luring him in. Once he made his way in and closed the door behind him, allowing only a small number of flurries to follow in his wake, Leon began his usual routine when finding a new residence; he started making his way to the top floor. Leon had always had more luck finding empty rooms in the upper levels of buildings, so typically he started at the top, and slowly made his way down, floor by floor, until a room was found to his liking. As he made his way through the empty halls and framework of this building, he noticed how many of the doors were slightly ajar, many of them having small kicked-in holes in the corners. Turning his nose slightly to his surroundings, he knew he wouldn't stay here for more than a night, if possible. This was no home fit for a man like himself.

Finally, reaching the top floor, Leon made his way through the narrow hallway, avoiding doors with small slants of light peeking out from under their frames, and giving slight nudges to see if any were ajar to those with only darkness showing. At the end of the L-shaped hallway, he came on a particularly scratched and worn-down wood door, which gave way with a loud creak as he touched it. Opening the door fully and stepping inside, he felt a cold chill escape its contents. With a heavy sigh, Leon knew it would have to do. Once inside, he shut the door behind him and inspected his surroundings.

Before him was a wide and spacious room that opened to the door, but it seemed to be the only one that lay in the flat. The room was entirely empty except for a small pile of rags in the far corner, shrouded by the darkly moonlit floor. There were no off-shooting rooms, no hallways, no closets, only a blank square room whose thin walls allowed in the winter cold beyond. Making his way across the room to the only window on the far wall, he felt the floor creak heavily under his feet, straining to hold his average frame as he crossed it. Indeed this would only be home for one night, he thought to himself. Within these dilapidated walls he would be lucky to find sleep.

While glancing out the cracked window to the street below, something caught his eye from the corner of the room. Something rustled from the pile of rags he had noticed before. Turning his attention to them, he took a step towards it, watching as one of the top sheets gave a slow drift closer to the wall it laid against. Presuming a rat or stray cat lay hidden, Leon took a few hard and loud steps with his heavy boots across the floor in the direction of the pile, hoping to scare its inhabitant away. Finding himself only a foot or two away from the pile, with no response to his actions, he was surprised to see that no animal surfaced. Instead, a frightened, shadowed figure raised its head, the dark eyes only truly visible in the moonlight, as they reflected a pale green back at him. It was a little child.

Not really knowing what to do, Leon stooped down to investigate, trying to squint in the darkness to see what this was that lay before him. At once, the adolescent sprang forth, shooting up from the rags as if they were aflame. Though to Leon's surprise, it didn't run, didn't attack, didn't scream. It merely clung around his low-hanging neck, and hung tight with those frail thin arms. It clung to him in desperation, in fear, in hope. Feeling soft sobs in his deep, heavy, wool coat, Leon instinctively wrapped his arms around the small child, shushing her shakes with his deep calming voice. His own thin arms didn't feel natural holding a child but, as the night wore on and her sobs subsided, she slept peacefully wrapped up against him, her small hand falling

restfully against his rough beard. He fell for her instantly that night, and in the months to come she would become the closest thing to family that Leon had had in years. It was then that Leon took in Peg and was then that the pair would together take the city of New York for every penny she held in her pockets.

For the first few days, Leon had waited, wanting to make sure the girl didn't have some family coming back to the little room for her. But after a week, he knew no one was coming. She was so quiet, so gentle, so hopelessly lost that Leon knew he had no choice but to take her in on his journeys through the city. When they first met, it seemed she knew nothing. She never spoke or did much of anything but follow at his back wherever he went. For a long time, he only referred to her as his *shadow* because she stayed so close to him always. She loved being called that very much, he remembered. Once he decided to formally adopt his little shadow and, since Leon figured her age to be around five, he decided this was as good a time as any to start her education. Someone had to teach her how the world worked, how to have a skill that would allow her a chance of success, and thieving was perfect for her—she was damn-near a prodigy.

She was so very small, and that was her greatest asset. Her little arms and hands were so skinny that it didn't take but two months before even he wasn't able to feel her reach into his pocket for a candy he kept for her. No one would ever suspect a small girl as harmless-looking as she to be the one to take their belongings. With her long dark hair and soft green eyes, she was able to reach into their lives and take a small portion of it back with her. Pieces so small, no one could think to remember them.

She was perfect. It was like working with a clean slate. She learned to talk, to live, to breathe through thievery. Her vocabulary only consisted of what was necessary for the craft, nothing more, nothing less. Through constant tutoring and guidance, it wasn't long before she was out on the streets as often as Leon, always following the rules, always keeping Leon's wise words in mind during those days. He didn't know why he chose to name her Peg, nor did he know why the name suited her as perfectly as it did. It was simple and beautiful, the kind of name you could easily fall in love with. Maybe that was why he named her as he had; it helped him love her all the more. Though it wasn't long, just over a year after that winter night, when Leon's love for the child would be put to the test.

For though he had always followed so blindly the rules that he had laid out for himself, getting another to do it, let alone a child, wasn't a task Leon had planned to be so difficult. And when the day came that she broke

one, nay not just any, but the cardinal rule, he knew he would have to set things right. He would have to sacrifice so she would learn their importance. In the end, he would have to give his freedom, his life of thievery that he loved so much so she would understand.

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Peg had arrived back from a day's worth of borrowing and, as was customary, she laid out all her finds for the two to look over. Today's loot was of the usual kind: some coins, a few crumpled up bills, a small silver fork she had likely taken from one of the neighboring stores. All were worth keeping, all acceptable as they fell into the rules. Leaning back against the cracked, white wall of the apartment they were staying in, Leon glanced out the window.

Through the dust which had gathered on the glass, he could see heavy dark clouds carrying across the sky. A blanket of them would likely snuff out the sunlight within the hour, ending what had been a warm, bright day outside. Standing in the waning light at the window, Peg redirected his attention.

"I saved the best for last, Mr. Leon. Wanna see?" Intrigued, Leon watched as the girl reached into the hem of her worn-out dress and held out her fist, holding the item tightly in her hand. Jiggling her clenched fist back and forth before him, hoping he would paw out like a cat seeing a toy, she smiled brightly before turning her wrist over and revealing the find. There in the palm of her hand it laid, the sunlight reflecting and dancing off the item, fluttering around the walls of the room.

Leon felt his heart fall into the pit of his stomach. His eyes blinked repeatedly, trying to focus, hoping that with each blink they would tell him something besides what was true. But each time they reopened, it was the same. The item lay plainly in her hand, softly touching her palm as she stood smiling broadly before him.

"Ain'ts it grand?" she asked, taking it with her other hand and holding it up to the light more. "Sure is tiny, but it's quite pretty isn't it? Sure we'll be able to gets a grand dollar for this one."

Leon's voice was caught in his throat. She didn't know what it was she had done. She couldn't have. There was no way she had any way of knowing the importance of the thing she held between her tiny fingers.

"Peg," he began in a calm voice, trying quickly in his mind to decide what to do. "Do you know what you've done? We can't keep this. We've got

to give it back. It goes against the rules.”

Furrowing her brow, and drawing the item back from the sunlight into her hands, bringing them tightly into her chest, she scowled at him.

“No,” she said stubbornly. “I founds it, I tooks it fair as can be, it’s mine. I don’t cares about the stupid rules, it’s mine. What’ll we do with it anyways? Just throws it away? We gots it now, may as well keeps it.”

The words stung Leon. For him, what she said was equal to someone denouncing God before a priest. The rules were golden. They were his life. They were not to be questioned or passed over. He had to make her understand.

“Peg, we won’t throw it away, and we can’t keep it. Remember the first rule?” he reached out for her hand, taking hers in his. “Someone will miss this. People don’t forget these kinds of things. We have to give it back.”

“*Gives it back?*” Peg repeated the words, her eyes squinting, struggling to understand. “Whats you mean *gives it back?*”

“We have to *return* it Peg, we gotta repay what we’ve taken.”

Seeing that her face was still contorted, showing confusion, Leon realized his follies. He had taught her well to be a thief, too well in fact. All her young mind understood was to *steal*, to take what was others and make it her own. He hadn’t ever bothered to teach her how to return, how to give away. He never said that these things meant more than money or food for the two of them. Taking his hand to his forehead he shook his head in disgust with himself. He had failed her. She knew nothing outside of how to take. She wasn’t borrowing, wasn’t following the rules. She was *stealing*.

“How can I make you understand?” he murmured to himself. “We have to give it back Peg. We gotta...” he couldn’t find the words to teach her, “We gotta *un*-thieve it.”

“Un-thieve it?” she said, pulling her head back at Leon’s words, making a face as if she had smelled some terrible stench. “You mean puts it back in their pockets, like you do them poor folks?”

“Yes,” Leon rolled back his head in alleviation that he had found a way to make her understand. “You see? This breaks the rules. We gotta make it right, otherwise we’ll get caught. Otherwise we’re just *stealing* Peg.”

At the mention of the word, she outstretched her arms and pushed the small possession into Leon’s care. Her eyes wide at the realization of what she was being accused of. “No-no, Mr. Leon, no! I didn’t steals, honest! I just, I don’t know. I’m sorry! We borrow, don’t steal. Make it right! Make it right!”

Taking it from her small hands, Leon tucked the item safely into his

pocket before gently patting his hand to the top of her head. Against the window, he could hear the soft tapping of rain as it began to fall outside. Likely any moment a downpour would start.

“It’s okay. We know the difference, don’t we? And that’s what’s important. We’ll go make it right, we’ll go right now. Now, where did you get this?”

“From a man on the street just outside, just outside the door.”

“Good, good,” he stood and she followed. “Now when we get out there, I’ll keep a look-out for them. You follow, but don’t stay too close. Okay, you can’t be at my side, not now.”

“I’ll be shadow again,” she replied, as she struggled through a smile behind trembling lips.

“That’s good,” he said softly, looking into her loving, tear-filled green eyes once more, trying to stay stern in his words. “No matter what happens though, you stay back. You have to stay back from me when we un-thieve this. No questions.”

Nodding that she understood, the pair made their way down the winding steps of their building to the street below where showers of rain from above had already begun drenching the still-crowded street. Knowing that Peg would have no problem staying at his back, he took no notice of her as he began running through the crowds, searching for a sign of the man she had stolen from. He knew once he found him he would know it. He only hoped he would have the chance to undo what she had done.

The rain was falling in thick sheets down on the concrete, forming dim outlines of the city-goers as they walked beneath it. His face dripping with desperation, Leon searched hard up and down the street, knowing that somewhere a man would be searching with the same intensity he was; a hunt for his lost possession, for his lost memories.

Just as he began to fear that there was no hope, just as he began to give up on a search for one man in the midst of a city, he saw him, though it wasn’t a relief he felt when gazing upon the man. It was despair. For it seemed that of which he had always taken for granted was about to be gone forever. His circumstances, his surroundings, his good fortune were nowhere to be found. From where he stood across the street, Leon could see the man’s face, frantic and dire; to his side, a young woman confused at the words she heard the man speak; and before him, a man wearing a black coat, black pants, black gloves, and dark, wide-brimmed hat. And though he couldn’t see it through his turned back, Leon knew a gold badge stuck to the other side of the man’s chest. These men had little tolerance of men like

Leon in times like this. He knew this may be the end.

Not wanting to talk himself out of what he had to do, he rushed across the street, each step causing an explosion of water to come up from the flooding at his feet. As he neared, through the rush of the rain he could make out what the man was saying, and instantly knew it was him.

“It’s, well...it’s small. It’s a...,” he stumbled, trying to find the words, “It’s very important.” He spoke as a man at his wits-end, a man who was in dire need of a miracle.

“Well, sir, you’re going to have to be more specific. I can’t help you recover the item if you don’t say what it is. Just tell me.”

“Just tell him, Tom,” spoke the woman, still bearing a look of confusion. “Why won’t you just say what was lost?”

“I-I just can’t,” the man spoke through gritted teeth to the woman over his shoulder before leaning in to the officer. Leon, who was just at the officer’s back, was able to overhear him mouth, “*It’s a surprise.*”

There was no doubt in Leon’s mind. No doubt that this was the man, and that this was what he had to do. Glancing one last time over his shoulder, he saw Peg running through the rain, trying to keep up, watching each step with care as she made her way through the flooded street. For a moment, their eyes met, and Leon gave her one last warm smile, a last moment of love with his little Peg. He then turned to the trio and spoke bluntly and truthfully.

“Sirs, madam, I believe I can be of some help.” The three turned their eyes to him, and through a pounding heart he pulled out the item from his coat pocket, holding it out in the rain. Overjoyed, the man reached slowly out and took it, a look of unending thanks and warmth in his eyes. The woman, now understanding, her eyes lighting up, spread a smile across her face, as she brought her hands flatly together in front of her mouth. Her face quickly turned pink, as tears rimmed the edges of her eyes. He watched the man slide the item, a small golden ring, onto her finger.

It had been returned, it had been done. He had returned the chance for love to the two. He had given back what should never, what could never be taken.

“Explain yourself!” bellowed the clean-faced officer, whose steely blue eyes were glaring into Leon’s. Knowing he wouldn’t lie, not now, not in a time like this, Leon spoke.

“Well, we didn’t mean to steal it, but-“

Suddenly, the words from his mouth stopped. He felt the hard strike of the officer’s club at the side of his head. Leon felt himself fall, and heavily land on his side against the hard ground. As he lay in the rain-

soaked gutter, the light of the world fading from his eyes, Leon watched as the couple, completely oblivious to him in their jubilation of one another, danced, hugged, kissed and celebrated in the rain. With the final moments of consciousness, Leon knew that he had made it right. He had followed his rules truthfully, had lived up to them as fully as any man could. He had even managed to accomplish the one rule he had always feared may go unsettled.

He had given it all back. Everything he had taken, everything he had borrowed over the years, it was all worthless compared to this act. He had been able to give joy and happiness to two souls who otherwise may have gone on forgotten in a world filled with despair. He had broken even with the house, had made a life full of wrongs right once more. Their love was something that could never be stolen but, nonetheless, Leon had found a way to give it back. This one moment was worth more than all of the things he ever had or ever could have taken.

As Leon lay crumpled and broken in that gutter, water and blood running over his body, he felt as though his very essence was being wiped clean. Though no one would be able to see due to the heavy rain rushing over him, tears of joy ran down Leon Halter's face, as he felt the world he knew and loved slip away. Each drop of rain, each streaming tear, felt more and more faint as the cold night took it all away from him, stealing his last breath.