PETER RICHARDSON

AFTER O. HENRY[1]

—Brinkley, Pennsylvania, 1903

With the bank manager and his secretary gone to the next county for lunch, why not ask me to liberate the child who has locked herself in the bank's safe? I will work with the dread and exultation that comes from knowing my last mask has been shucked. I will place the stethoscope, calipers and stainless steel instruments for which I was once notorious on the floor while a growing crowd of spectators are kept beyond the wickets. Massive tumblers will soon be wooed into motion. What better candidate do you have? There isn't a person within four states who can do what I can for the sake of a five-year-old scamp too smart for her own good. I will plop my patent leather bag down on polished hardwood. I will rotate the door's wheel till the foot-thick portal guarding the cash, jewelry, treasury bonds, wills and deeds swings back like the gate on a picket fence. I will turn to assembled customers—the child's mother in tears of continuous gratitude—for which I finally feel little, and step towards my tools, the privately forged trappings of my profession. When these are returned to their pouches or rolled in velour cloths and inserted into my bag, I will hold out my wrists to the town cop who has been called in by excited gawkers outside First Savings and Loan. He will tell me to forget it, to walk at an even pace to the train station with my fiancée at my side to whom much will have to be explained for us to continue where we left off under a new seal of understanding. Didn't I tell her six months ago when we first met that I'd made my money in mining? A tension will spring up between us which I will have to put to rest over the months to come as the fifty-pound carryall, which I had intended to leave to a junior associate in Philadelphia, remains on the bank floor to be rummaged through by a horde of earnest local constables.

[1]O. Henry was the pen name of the American short story writer, William Sydney Porter (1862–1910).