

# The Three Investigators

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## The Case of the Sour Salesman



**Mark Zahn**

*The Three Investigators in*

**The Case of the  
Sour  
Salesman**

by Mark Zahn

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Despite its abrasive cognomen, the terrain of Rocky Beach, California is not particularly rocky. Its name derives from a sea-wall of large boulders that stretches along the coast, separating the sand from a seemingly endless succession of gift shops, restaurants, surf shacks, and parking lots.

Virtually any day in which the sun is shining the beach is alive with people – picnicking families, surfer-dude regulars, teenagers with skateboards and Frisbees, and the tourists who are in constant need of sun-block, soft drinks, and sea food. It's their infusion of capital that helps keep these local businesses thriving.

Yet even in this picturesque setting, where crime is kept at bay by our friend Chief Reynolds and his excellent police force, the criminal element still finds a way to rear its ugly head. Such was the case today when Bob Andrews, Pete Crenshaw, and I were enjoying a rare day off from my aunt and uncles' salvage yard where we are employed part-time. By the way, my name is Jupiter Jones, and I swear I don't go looking for trouble, despite what my friends might say...

This was another case of being at the right place at the right time, or, as Pete would say: the right place at the wrong time. Bob and Pete think I have some kind of sixth sense for mysteries, but in actuality it is simply being aware of one's surroundings, observant of the details, and keeping track of all the known facts – no matter how trivial they may seem. In this way, when a mystery does present itself, I'm that much ahead of the game.

Being the most athletic of The Three Investigators (the junior detective firm we started some time ago) and an avid surfer, Pete had lugged his bodyboard with him as we coasted our bicycles to our favorite spot on the beach. Bob and I had planned on soaking up some sun while going over the notes of our latest case, *The Mystery of the Spectral Voice*. It was too nice of a day to be cooped up inside of our

secret headquarters at the salvage yard, and the idea of writing up the case over some lemonade smoothies from our favorite stand was hard to resist.

As Pete paddled out into the surf, Bob and I locked our bicycles to the rack beside Rocky Beach Federal's ATM machine and headed over to the asphalt bike path where Jacques' Lem&Wade stand was parked – or, at least, where the Lem&Wade *should* have been parked. A shiny new lemonade trailer was parked directly across from Jacques' spot – this one had a big red cross on it and was called Jerry's Lem&Aid.

“Hey, I don't get it... Where's Jacques?” said Bob.

We looked at the empty spot where our friend's small, ramshackle refreshment trailer was usually parked. In its place were the four familiar painted bricks he used to block the wheels and keep his stand from rolling down the slight grade of the bike path and into the sea.

Next to one of the bricks was a large pool of water and a half of a lemon. I knelt down and picked up the lemon, dipped my finger into the puddle of water, and then tossed the fruit to Bob.

“Observe.”

Bob held the lemon in the palm of his hand and shrugged. “It's cold. Someone must have spilled their drink. But what does that have to do with Jacques?”

Jacques was a regular at the beach – he had been selling smoothies for as long as we could remember. No one knew his last name, but it hardly mattered. He was just Jacques, and he always had a smile and a bit of fortune-cookie advice for his loyal customers. Over the years, vendors selling a variety of wares came and went, but the Lem&Wade never changed. It was as familiar to the locals as the painted fence surrounding the Jones Salvage Yard.

Bob pushed up his glasses and frowned. “The longest I’ve ever seen Jacques gone from his stand is when he puts up a note saying: ‘Back In 5.’ I guess we’ll have to try this new stand. Let’s hope Jerry’s smoothies are as good as Jacques.”

“They’re not just as good,” said a gravelly voice, “they’re better! Come on over here and try a free sample. Give it a taste and tell me if I’m wrong.”

“You must be Jerry,” I said. “I realize you’re new to this locality, but do you happen know what befell our friend Jacques?”

A beefy man with hairy arms covered in tattoos, Jerry just shrugged – his eyes hidden behind mirrored sunglasses. “Beats me, kid – here, try a sample and tell your friends. Jerry’s the name and lemonade’s my...”

Before he could finish, two Rocky Beach police officers raced by on patrol bicycles, one of them sounding a small air-horn in order to clear the road. Bob looked over my shoulder and blinked.

“Looks like some kind of trouble.”

He was right. A crowd was gathering at the bottom of the bike path, which ended in a small turn-around. We left our smoothie samples and jogged down the path.

“Hey – don’t forget to tell your friends!” Jerry called after us.

The turn-around at the end of the bike path was encircled by thick wooden posts, each about six feet apart. A thick rope was threaded through holes drilled into each post, effectively making a barrier indicating that bicyclers needed to stop or risk plummeting over the edge onto the sea-wall of large boulders I mentioned before.

While the bike path was paved, this portion – being the closest to the beach – was covered in a fine layer of sand. As Bob and I approached the crowd, I immediately noticed a set of tire tracks had been imprinted in the sand – much too big to be made by bicycles tires.

“Look...” said Bob, pointing to the rope barrier. The center-most section of rope at the end of the turn-around had been snapped in two. “That can’t be good!”

I had already observed what had startled Bob and was mentally putting the pieces together. Jacques’ missing trailer plus the tire tracks in the sand plus the severed rope barrier added up to trouble.

“Come on,” I said, “let’s see if Jacques is okay.”

We made our way down the rock wall and elbowed our way through the crowd. The ancient trailer that was Jacques’ Lem&Wade lay on its side, battered and broken – the hitch that connected to his truck was completely snapped off. Jacques was sitting in the sand holding a bag of ice to his head, his back resting on the remains of his small trailer. I was happy to see that Pete was talking to the police officers that had just arrived.

“I saw the whole thing from my bodyboard,” he was saying. “No one was around the stand and no one gave it a push. It just started rolling by itself!”

“The painted bricks that Jacques uses for wheel blocks were in place,” Bob added. “We saw them for ourselves. Maybe the air pressure in the tires is low and the wheels went right over the bricks...”

“Impossible,” Jacques said, wincing slightly. “I check the tire pressure every day. My trailer, she is old but she is sturdy...at least, she was... I couldn’t get a vending license otherwise. No, somebody tampered with the bricks – and I think I know who.” At this point he looked at me. “Jupiter, my friend – this is your arena. I can see by the way you pinch your lip that you suspect the same scoundrel. Can you prove it?”

I looked up the bike path to where Jerry’s Lem&Aid was parked. A large line of people was forming in front of the stand. In fact several people, apparently already bored with the morning’s excite-



ment at the turn-around, had already left the scene and were walking back up the grade for a frozen refreshment.

“Proof beyond a reasonable doubt may be difficult to establish,” I said, “but I just might take Jerry up on his offer of a free sample.”

Bob looked at me with his mouth agape. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “You think that creep destroyed Jacques’ stand...”

Pete finished his thought. “...And instead of proving it you want to try his lemonade?”

I began walking up the bike path. “Who knows,” I grinned, “a cold refreshment from Jerry’s Lem&Aid might prove enlightening. Come on – it’s my treat.” At this point I turned to look at the two patrolmen, who were helping Jacques to his feet. “You might like to join us, officers. I believe you’ll find more up here than down there.”

Within moments Pete, Bob, and I were in line at Jerry’s Lem&Aid, with the two policemen directly behind us. When it was our turn I ordered three lemonade smoothies. I sampled the drink and gave my approval to Jerry. “It’s delicious, even better than Jacques! What’s your secret?”

Jerry’s eyes remained hidden behind his mirrored sunglasses, but his mouth curled up on one side in a knowing grin. He lit an unpleasant smelling cigar and blew the acrid smoke in my face.

“It’s all in the ice,” he said in his gravelly voice. “I don’t use that pre-packaged stuff that comes in a bag like your friend. My ice is chipped right off the block by a patented process of my own invention. Makes it taste fresh and not like plastic.”

“You use blocks of ice to make your smoothies?” I asked. “As a fellow entrepreneur, that seems like an unnecessary expense.”

“You bet I do,” said Jerry, puffing his foul smoke. “Special order it, too – it’s made from pure mountain water – with a twist. It’s

not that tap-water crud your pal uses. Sure, it drives up the overhead a little, but you can't put a price on quality. However, if you want to know how it's done you're out of luck. My recipe is top secret."

"That's not the only thing secret," I said. "I suspect your early morning activities are as well." I turned to look at the two policemen. "Officers, Jerry has some explaining to do. It's my belief he sabotaged Jacques' Lem&Wade stand so he could have a racket on the beach's smoothie trade. The sun may have erased the evidence, but Rocky Beach Federal will not have erased their tape."

Jerry mashed out his cigar and frowned. "What the devil are you talking about kid? What tape?"

I nodded my head to the ATM where we had parked our bicycles. "You'll observe the automated teller machine stationed just across the path. As anyone who withdraws cash electronically can tell you, all such machines are equipped with surveillance cameras. Rocky Beach Federal's machine happens to be pointed roughly in this vicinity. It's my hope that when we view the tape, we'll see the facts add up to a sour conclusion."

*How did Jupe know Jerry was guilty of sabotaging Jacques lemonade stand? Turn to page 10 to find out!*

## SOLUTION

Jupiter deduced that the half of lemon he found on the bike path most likely came from Jerry's, since Jacques' lemonade stand was not parked in its usual place. The fact that the lemon was still cold seemed to solidify this theory. When he dipped his finger into the puddle of water and discovered that it, too, was cold he began to suspect foul play.

By process of ratiocination, Jupiter theorized that if the painted bricks which held Jacques' *Lem&Wade* were moved just enough, an ice block could be used to hold the trailer in place. When the sun heated up the asphalt bike path, the ice block would quickly melt, causing the slightest motion by Jacques to set the trailer rolling down the small hill toward the sea-wall.

When Jerry said his ice blocks were special ordered 'with a twist,' Jupe knew he was on the right track. Speculating that Jerry had his ice blocks made with a half of a lemon frozen in the middle, Jupe gambled that the shady entrepreneur would confess when faced with the possibility of the bank's ATM camera exposing his crime.

When the police contacted the bank in order to look at the machine's tape, Jerry reluctantly confessed to sabotaging Jacques' *Lem&Wade*. After a large cash settlement by Jerry, Jacques was able to purchase a new trailer and re-open the *Lem&Wade Too*. Jerry was forced to close down and banned from vending in Rocky Beach forever.