

GUNMAN'S BLUFF

Edgar Wallace
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SYNOPSIS

Rex Leferre forges the name of Luke Maddison, wealthy banker and his sister Margaret's fiance, to a large check. He is found dead with a note in his handwriting accusing Maddison of having ruined him. Margaret marries Luke Maddison, after he has given her everything he owns. She leaves him, telling him she has ruined him to revenge her brother. Luke, bewildered, wanders about London, is attacked by thugs who take him for a detective, recovers in hospital to find he is known as "Smith." In this new character he becomes involved with the Joe Connors gang, who mistake him for an Australian crook named Smith, and is made an unwilling accomplice in a jewel robbery. He does not know that Margaret has relented and has returned to his bankers all the money he gave her, to the dismay of one Danton Morrell, her dead brother's friend, concerning whom Gunner Haynes, an American jewel thief, whom Maddison had once befriended, has been making inquiries. Detective Bird of Scotland Yard, known also as The Sparrow, is likewise interested in Morrell. Maddison goes to his own old bachelor quarters, is taken for a burglar, escapes from the police and tries to get in touch with Detective Bird. The Connors gang learn of this, sandbag and imprison him in an underground cell near the river where he is certain to be drowned when the tide rises. Meantime Margaret, revisiting Luke's old rooms finds a sheet of paper on which Luke had begun a letter to his friend and lawyer saying that he is in desperate trouble. Margaret's joy over the recovery that Luke is alive and in London is tempered by the statement of Detective Bird that the man concerned in the jewel robbery, whom she now knows was Luke, had been going around for two years with the woman whose accomplice he was.

hundreds of penciled notes from him, and I couldn't possibly be mistaken." "Who found it?" "Mr. Morrell found it in Rex's room. Poor, dear Rex had a servant a very trustworthy man, and he saw the note before Mr. Morrell put it in his pocket—" "He didn't read it, of course?" suggested the Gunner. "The servant, I mean." "I don't think so. He only saw the note, and Mr. Morrell hid it." The Gunner had an amazing memory. He could from that moment have repeated every word in the letter—there was no need for him to take a copy, and he handed it back to the girl.

No man wasted less time or effort than Gunner Haynes. His method represented the very economy of labor. He was satisfied that Connor had carried away his victim, but was wrong when he associated Danty Morrell with the abduction.

He called upon Connor but was told vaguely that the man had gone into the country. He did not attempt

he found a wooden box, the lock of which he forced. There were papers here—bundles of letters tied up with shoelaces, bits of old string—there was nothing romantic in Danty's disposition.

The first bundle did not interest him. At the sight of the writing on the second his face went gray. He brought the box into the dining room and sat down, read three of the letters, glanced at the others, and very slowly and deliberately tied them up again and put them back in the box. As he did so he caught sight of a scrap of paper exactly the size of that on which Rex had written his last message. He took it out—yes, it was scrawled in the same handwriting. But the message was unintelligible. It ran:

Danty Morrell. The man is a common swindler. I was warned against him by—

And then in a flash he realized. He had an extraordinary memory, and could repeat almost word for word the supposedly complete message



"Is this your brother's handwriting?" She nodded

to seek an interview with Danty Morrell, but after a day spent in a vain search of Connor's wharf, made his way to Half Moon Street, watched the house until he saw first Danty and then Pi Coles leave. To get into Danty's flat was a very simple matter—a key blank, a piece of lamp-black, a quarter of an hour spent in Green Park filing the soft metal, produced him an entrance.

Once inside the flat he proceeded at his leisure. He was not at all anxious at the thought of Danty's return. His hatred of Morrell was in one sense illogical. They had been friends and partners, though he had lost sight of the man and the partnership had broken off. He had no direct proof of the duplicity he suspected. Gunner Haynes had loved that feather-headed little wife of his, and when she had disappeared, never to become more to him that a record in a workhouse register, a tremendous part of his life had been cut away from him. He might suspect Danty as the cause of his agony; he had no clear evidence that the story the man had told was untrue.

Danty had said the girl had disappeared, and that he was ignorant of her whereabouts as her husband. Yet, for all this, the suspicion in Gunner Haynes' mind amounted to a certainty. He was a just man, and so long as that proof was missing, Danty Morrell would come to no harm.

He made a quick but thorough examination of the two rooms. There were letters which had to be scanned, pocketbooks to investigate, drawers to be opened and searched, but in none of these did Haynes find the slightest clue to Luke Maddison's present place of imprisonment. He did find the note which Connor had scribbled, giving the address where Luke was staying, but no more. There remained only the safe, which was not so much a safe as a steel cupboard fastened with a spring lock—the type that is found in most business offices. To open this was a matter of five minutes' patient work.

There were four shelves and each was crowded with letters, bills, and curious souvenirs which Danty had collected—the cupboard was in such disorder as only a man without method could create. On the third shelf

Rex had left. With these words added it would have read:

Margaret darling, I have lost. For months I have been gambling. To-day I took a desperate step on the advice of Danty Morrell. The man is a common swindler. I was warned against him by Luke Maddison. He has led me to ruin—money is his god. I beg of you not to trust him. He has led me from one act of folly to another.

That was it! Danty had found that the first and last of those scraps made a complete message; he had put the second in his pocket (it still bore marks of being screwed up.)

It came as something in the nature of a shock to Margaret Maddison to discover how completely changed were her feelings toward the man with whom she had passed through stages of toleration to liking, and from liking to a sort of passive affection, and from that again, in the cataclysmic revolution of feeling that her brother's death had brought about, to

the bitterest loathing. For the first time in her life Margaret was in love, and in love with something which was neither a memory nor an idea, but something which was to her as real as her own hand. She had gained that sense of possession which is the wife's own sense—an understanding of her obligations. She could not afford to waste time in regrets at the amazing follies and wicked errors of the past; in the days that followed her mind was occupied with schemes for helping him out of the morass in which he struggled.

She did not hear from Gunner Haynes, although she stayed up until nearly two o'clock the next morning, having the telephone switched thru to her bedside. Nor did the next day bring news. She was out when Danty called, and having no occasion to go to her check book, she did not discover his theft.

After she discovered it, she called on him. Danton heard her voice and was coming near the hall to meet her before the door was closed.

"This is an unexpected pleasure Margaret," he said. "Is anything wrong?" She did not answer until she was in his room.

"Before I tell you why I've come," she said, "I think it is only fair that you should know I have left instructions that unless I am back in my house in three-quarters of an hour my butler will ring up Mr. Bird and tell him where I have gone."

He frowned at this.

"What's the idea?" he asked harshly. "That's an extraordinary word to behave—why the dickens shouldn't you be back in three-quarters of an hour?"

"Where are the remainder of those checks that you stole from my check book when you called the other day?" She saw his face go red.

"I don't know what you mean," he said loudly. "I steal checks? What nonsense you're talking—"

"You came into my house and you were in my sitting room long enough to extract ten checks. One of them was brought to the bank today, made out in Luke's name and signed by him. On my instructions the check was not honored."

The color left his face.

"Not honored?" he stammered, and in his embarrassment he betrayed his share of the guilt.

"I'm less interested in the check than in my husband," she said quietly. "Where is he?"

He strove vainly to recover his self-possession and forced a smile.

"Really, my dear girl!" he began. "You'll address me as Mrs. Maddison, if you have to address me as anything," she said. "I want you to return those checks; I want you also to tell me exactly where Luke is."

"As far as I know, he's staying with a convicted thief named Haynes" the man answered roughly, and to his surprise she nodded.

"I thought so, too. I went down to see him—but he had gone. I think

Mr. Haynes was surprised to find that he had gone, and I'm only now understanding that Luke did not go of his own free will. Then I thought he may have wandered out by himself in order to escape association with Mr. Haynes. But the check explains a great deal. Where is Luke? He shook his head.

"I don't know."

"In that case I am going to do what I was trying to avoid," she said. "I am going to the police, and I shall charge you with stealing the blank checks, and leave it to Mr. Bird to connect you with Luke's disappearance."

She half turned to the door, but he caught her by the arm.

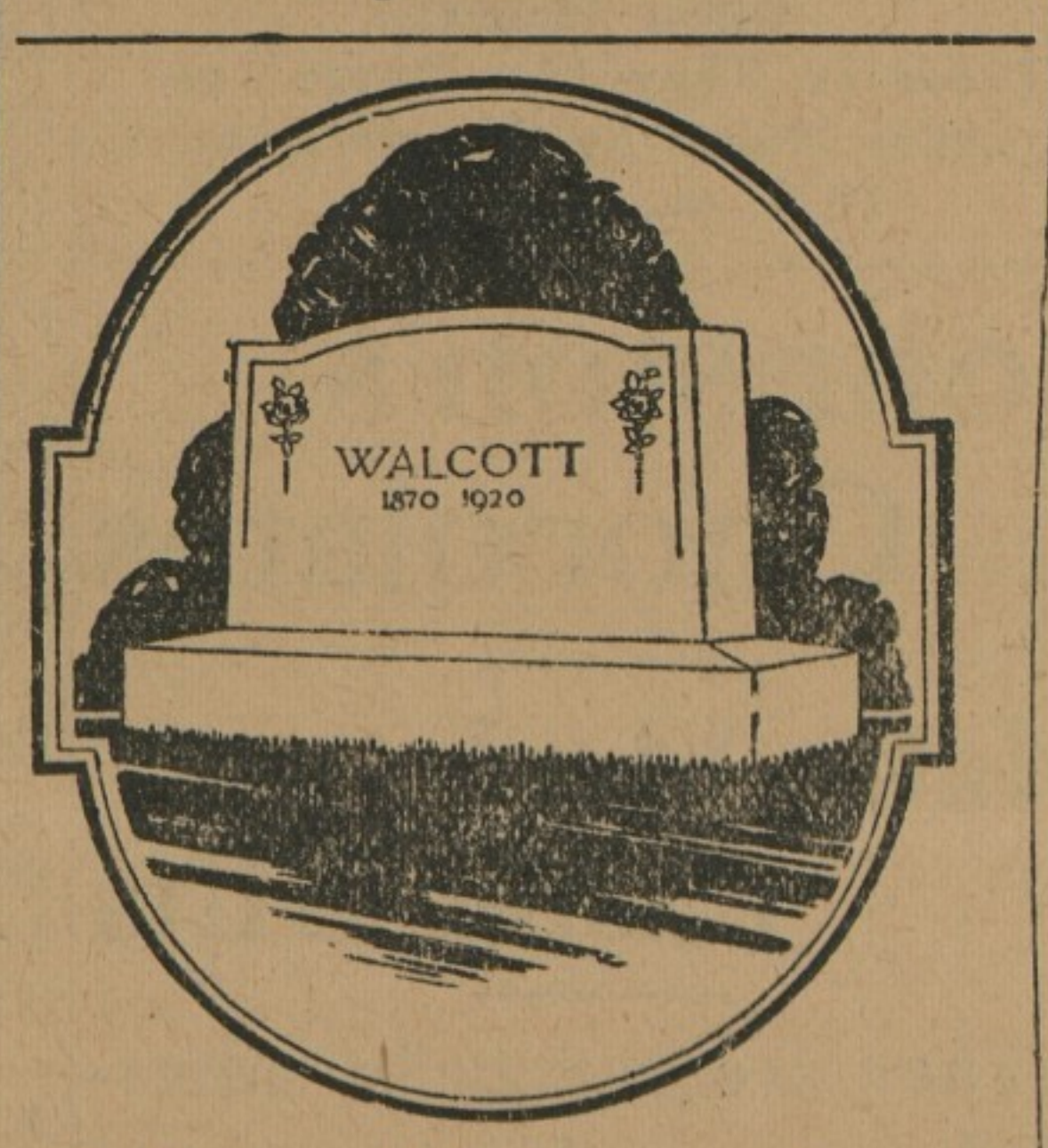
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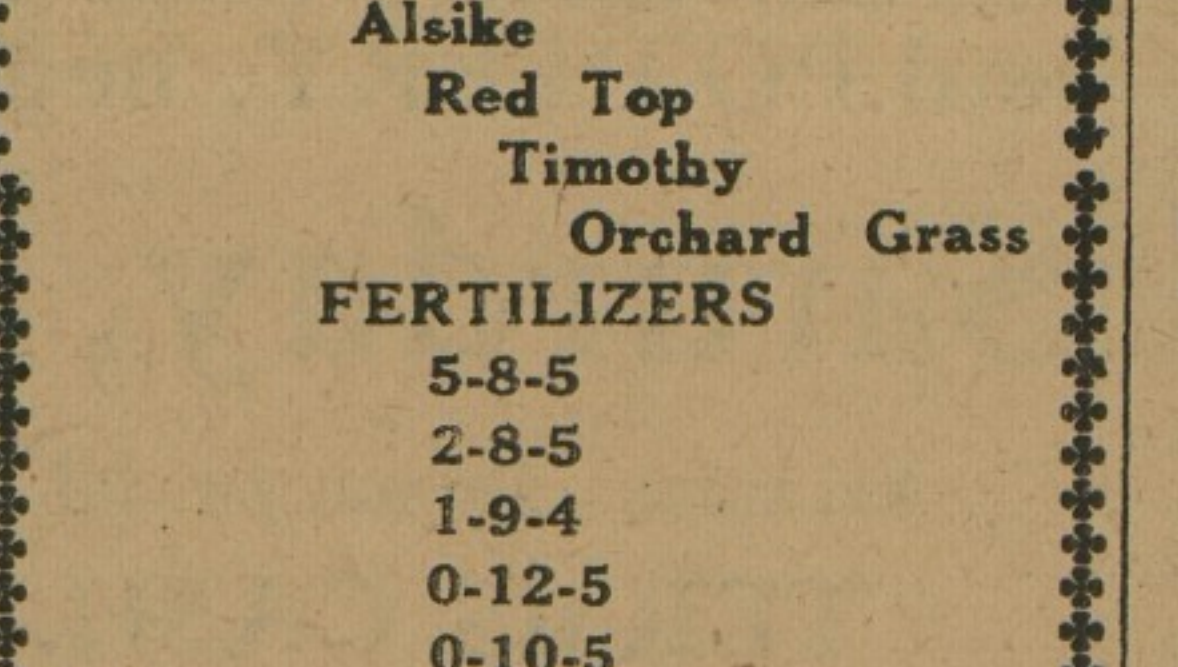
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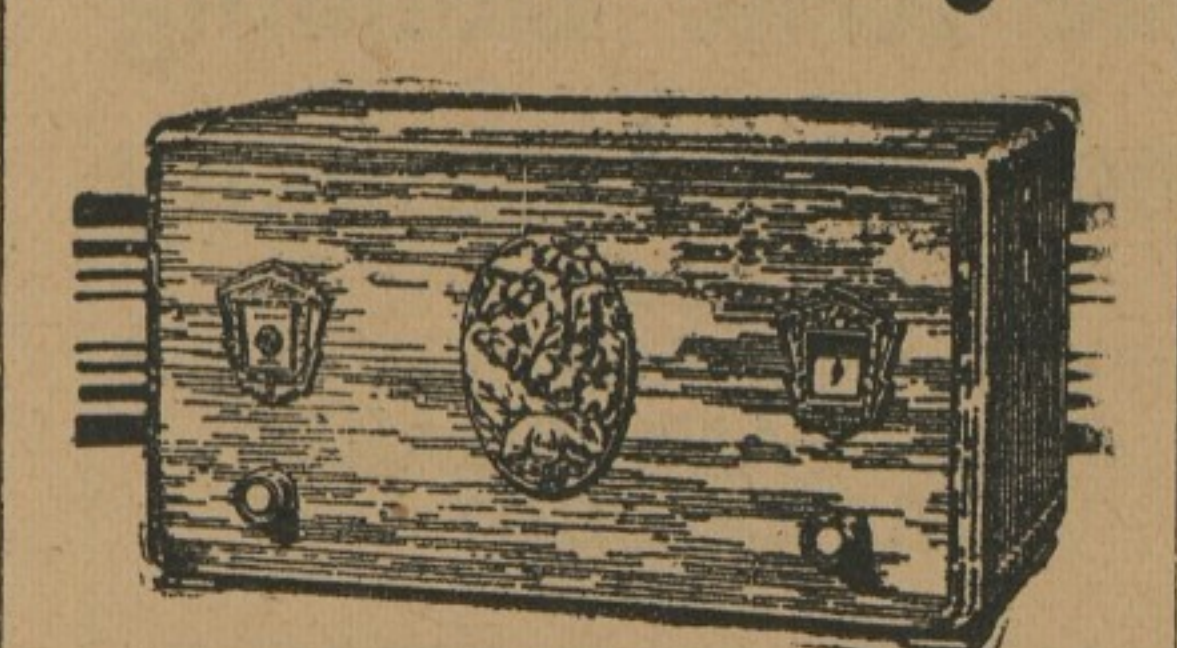
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