

GUNMAN'S BLUFF

Edgar Wallace

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SYNOPSIS

Margaret Lefere marries Luke Maddison, wealthy banker, after he has transferred to her every dollar he has in the world. After the ceremony he asks her for some money with which to pay an obligation. She refuses, declaring that she shall never have a cent of his money back. She discloses to him the fact that her brother, Rex, who was found shot, had left a note saying that Maddison had ruined him, and Margaret had married Luke for revenge. She does not tell him that Maddison had forged Maddison's name to a large check. Maddison leaves her and wanders about London, trying to understand what happened, when he meets Lewing, an underworld character who has previously brought him a message from Gunner Haynes, a famous American crook.

The two are attacked by Joe Connors' gang, who think Luke is a detective whom Lewing has put on their trail. Lewing is killed and Maddison seriously wounded. He recovers consciousness two weeks later and finds he is known in the hospital only as "Smith." He decides to retain that name. A messenger from Connors calls at the hospital, gives him \$25 and the address of a Mrs. Fraser, explaining that there is a room there for him and that the gang wants to make amends for its mistake in attacking him. Luke goes to the Ginnett street address and finds a good room ready for him.

Meantime Margaret has had a telegram from Paris signed "Luke" saying he has found consolation elsewhere and will let her have a divorce. She doubts that it is genuine. Danton Morrell, a friend of her brother, Rex, calls on her to try to get some money. She horrifies him by telling him that she has given all the money which Luke gave her back to his trustee, who is making her an allowance to live on. She is convinced that Luke has gone to his favorite resort in Spain and intends to join him there. Morrell realizes that Margaret is in love with her husband and that his own schemes are likely to fall through.

While they are talking Gunner Haynes is announced. Morrell begs

for asking the other. Morrell is the kind of man that no decent woman should know.

She walked to the table and pressed the little onyx bell push. This time he smiled.

"That means you're going to turn me out, and I don't blame you. I'm afraid I've blundered this interview, which I intended should be very discreet and diplomatic. I particularly wished to know where Mr. Maddison was."

"I have told you," she said, as the maid appeared in the doorway. "As far as Danty Morrell is concerned—" he began.

Her hand pointed to the door. "I am not prepared to discuss my friends—even with the criminal acquaintances of my husband," she said, and she heard him chuckling as he went down the stairs as though at a very good joke.

Margaret walked slowly along the asphalt path. As she did so she saw a car coming slowly along the tan on the other side of the road. It was an electric brougham containing two people: a beautiful-looking girl, fashionably dressed; by her side, his face half hidden under a broad-brimmed Stetson hat, a bearded man of striking appearance. Ahead of her was walking a stout-looking man, and by his side a rather pretty girl. As she overtook them she heard the stout man say:

"Take a look at that swell woman! That's Jean Gurlay—the biggest crook in London, my dear."

Those ahead of her she recognized as the Sparrow and his companion, and, not wishing to be seen by them, sat down on a garden seat, her eyes following curiously the electric brougham. She saw the machine turn at the Marble Arch and come slowly along by the side of the curb, and she watched with a detached interest the beautiful girl and the bearded man, whose head was turned toward his companion. As they passed she heard the man say:

"This is all very mysterious. What does it mean?"

In an instant she was on her feet, pale and shaking; she had recognized the voice of the bearded man. It was

They crossed into Hyde Park, made a slow progress near the edge of the sidewalk, and he found himself enjoying the novel experience. She was very pretty, though older than he had thought.

"Do you see that fat man over there? That's the Sparrow. You want to keep away from him."

He started at the name. "You mean Bird?" he stammered, and looked guiltily in the direction she indicated.

He saw Mr. Bird. He was walking with a very pretty girl, but the woman who was at that moment seating herself on one of the park benches he did not recognize.

As the brougham turned and came back on the other side of the road, she said suddenly:

"There will be a car waiting near the Cavalry Barracks. I hope you can drive?"

"Another car?" he asked in astonishment.

She nodded.

"I want to try you out."

He laughed.

"All this is very mysterious," he said.

The car was waiting for them, a closed light car of English make. There was nobody in attendance, but without hesitation she stopped the brougham and gave the driver instructions.

"Here it is," she said. "Get in."

Luke sank into the driver's seat and put his foot on the self-starter, and she came in after him, slamming the little door behind her.

"Grafton Street," she said in a businesslike tone. "Pull up opposite the Rean Club."

He thought she was testing his driving ability, for he had to pass through three traffic blocks before he brought the machine to a standstill at a place she indicated.

"Now you understand," she said, dropping her voice and speaking rapidly. "I'm going to see my husband."

She looked him straight in the eyes. "If he makes a fuss I shall expect you to help me. If he doesn't make a fuss, we'll drive quietly away down Albemarle Street, make for Vauxhall Bridge and Tooting Common."

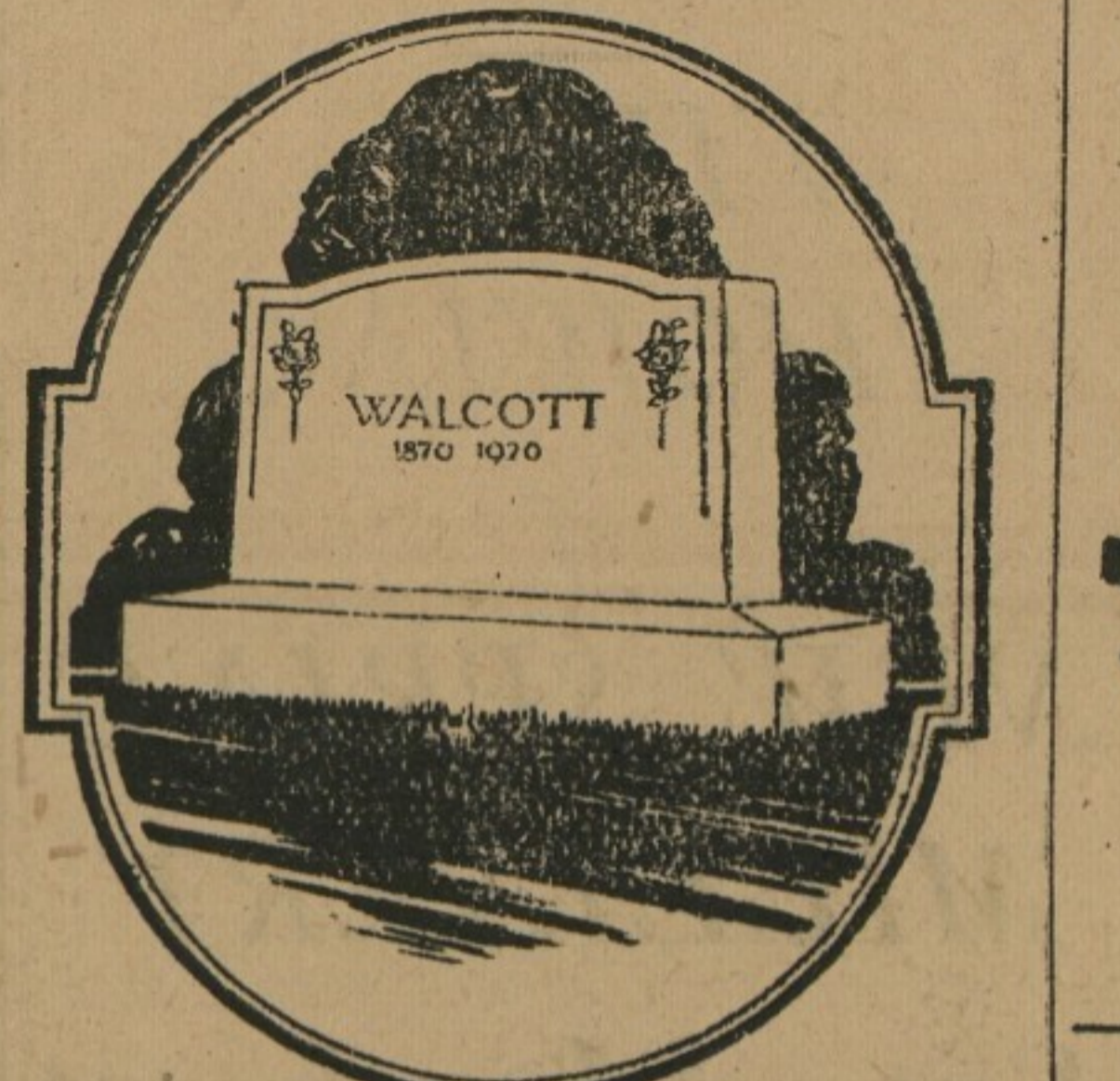
"Your husband?" he stammered.

She gave him one quick look of suspicion.

"That is what you tell the flatie if there is any fuss."

What a flatie she did not explain, and was gone before he could ask her. He kept the engine running according to her instructions. She was gone some twenty minutes. Presently, looking out, he saw her turn the corner from Bond Street walk with apparent unconcern toward him. As

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she stepped into the car, a man in his shirt-sleeves darted around the corner, flew at her, and gripped her by the arm. She tried to wrench herself free, and before Luke realized what he was doing he had struck her assailant and sent him tumbling to the pavement.

"Drive!" she snapped and mechanically Luke Maddison sent the machine leaping forward.

They crossed Oxford Street, down St. James Street, through the park, and were over Vauxhall Bridge before he partly realized what had happened.

"Why did that fellow grab you?" he asked.

"My husband—I had a row with him," she said calmly. And then: "I knew Connor was wrong," she said, and whistled. "If I hadn't had my wits about me and started that husband story, I'd have been half-way to Holloway."

He saw her look at every policeman they passed, out of the corner of her eye, and his heart was beating faster as they came to the edge of Tooting Common, and at her command he stopped the car.

"We'll get out here," she said. "You can go back by bus, I'll take a taxi if Connor comes tonight, tell him I've got the stuff."

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

"What stuff?" he asked sternly.

And then he saw the flat case she carried under her leather coat.

"My God!" gasped Luke Maddison. "You stole that?"

There was amusement in her fine eyes as she nodded.

"Of course I did, you poor simp."

A taxicab was passing and she hailed it. Slowly his grip on her arm relaxed. He watched the taxi recede like a man in a dream, too stunned even to think. He could never remember that journey back to Lambeth. He had crossed Westminster Bridge when he saw a newsboy with a placard: "Daring West End Robbery." He stood dead still, gazing open-mouthed at the contents bill.

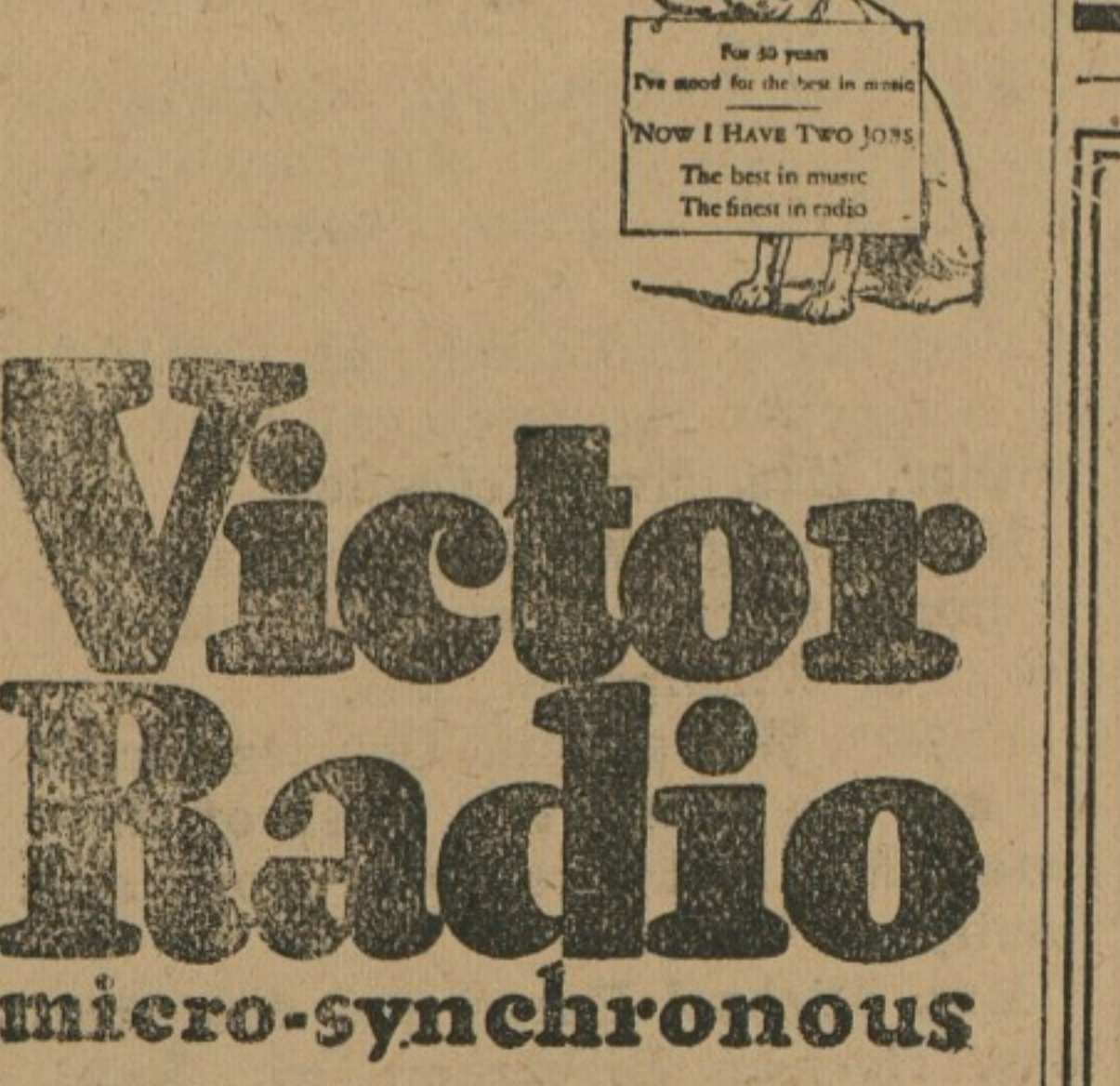
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and then he felt in his pocket and dropped a penny from his trembling hand into the newsboy's palm. He dared not look inside the newspaper until he was in a quiet street. Then he read:

DARING WEST END ROBBERY
Bearded Man and Pretty Girl Rob Taffanny's of £20,000 Diamond Necklace

A daring robbery was committed this afternoon at Messrs. Taffanny's jewel shop in Bond Street. At about 3:50 a well-dressed woman walked into the shop and asked to be shown some plain gold rings. Whilst the assistant's back was turned, she must have broken a glass case with a rubber-headed hammer. When he came back, he found not only the woman but a valuable diamond necklace had disappeared. He flew out into the street and overtook the woman as she was entering a motor car. He was immediately struck down by her companion, who is described as a man of great height, with a fair, well-trimmed beard, dressed in a gray tweed suit.

"That's me!" groaned Luke Maddison, and almost swooned.

For a quarter of an hour he sat and watched his tea growing cold, his mind vacillating between horror and amusement. He, Luke Maddison, was a thief, a gangster, an active member of an organization which had robbed Taffanny's! He knew Taffanny's rather well; he had bought Margaret's engagement ring over the very glass counter that had been smashed. He was helpless—the idea of going to the police and betraying his associates never occurred to him. There was only one thing to be done and that was to steal away at the first opportunity. He had written for his check book to be sent to Rordia, and it was a simple matter to reach Spain. Was it, though?

With a gasp he realized that he had no passport! And without a passport it was impossible to reach Spain, of all countries, where every man and woman who passed across the frontier were closely scrutinized. If he had not dismissed his servant it would be easy to crook back to his flat one night, pack a bag, and fade away into a Continental limbo. But probably his solicitor had the key of the flat. A new hope awakened. Hulbert had an apartment in St. James' Street. He was a bachelor and accessible.

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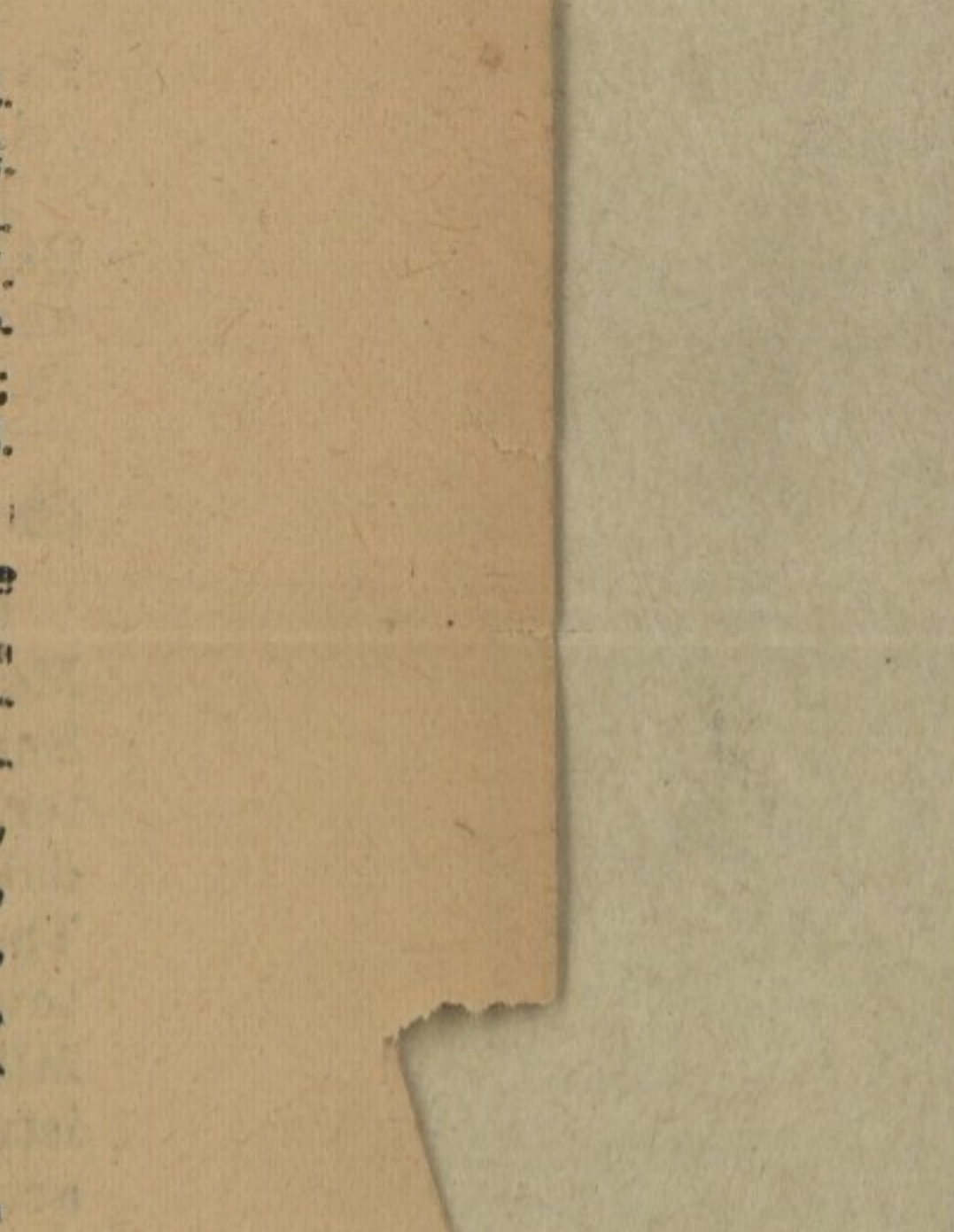
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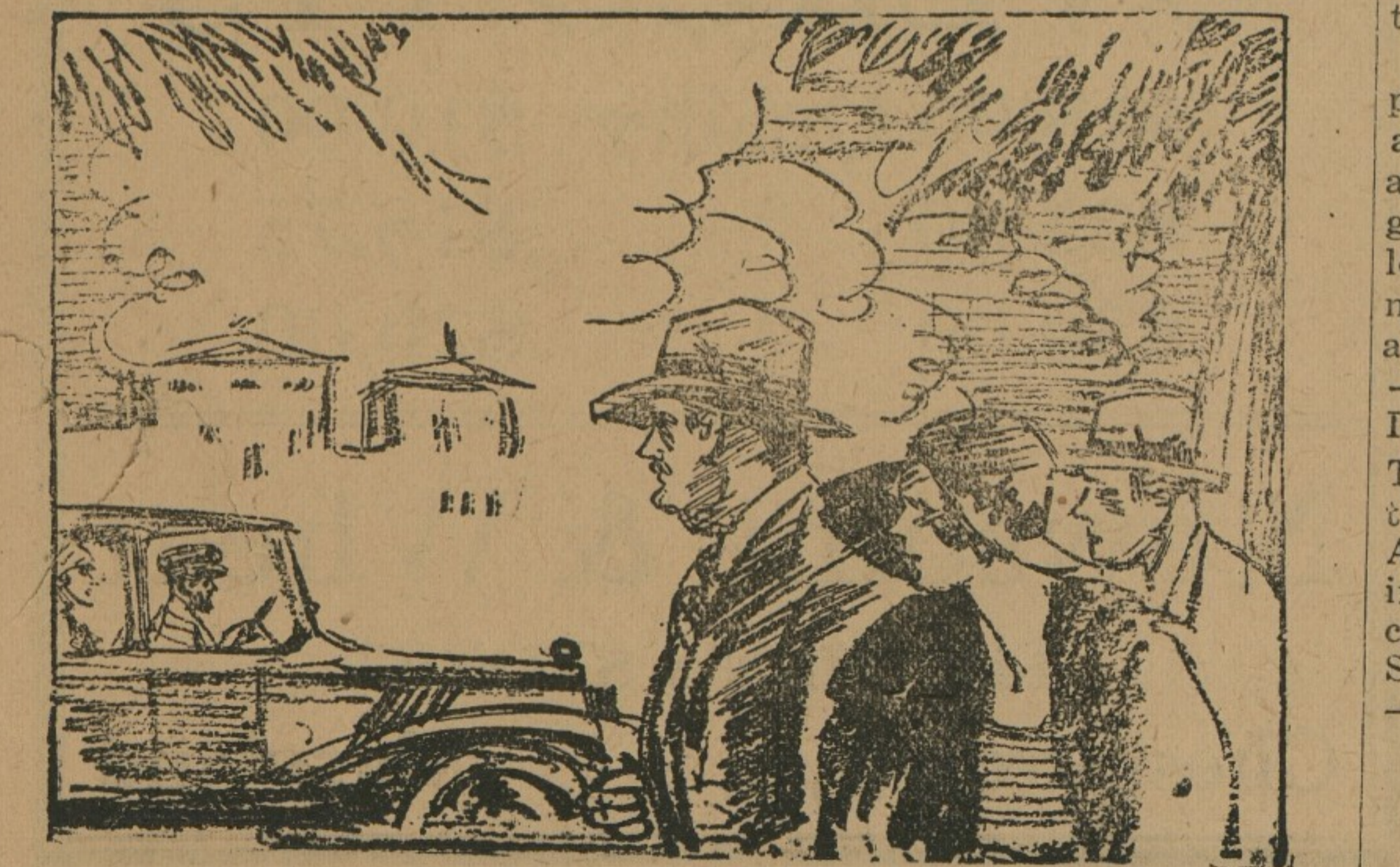
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"Take a look at that swell woman! That's Jean Gurlay—the biggest crook in London, my dear"

her not to see him, and then she insists. Morrell hides in another room. Haynes admits that he is a jewel thief and that he is just out of prison, but Luke Maddison had once tried to do him a favor and he wants to return it if possible. He asks if Danton Morrell is a friend of her, and why her husband left her.

Now Go On With The Story—

"I should be a little worse than impertinent. And yet, Mrs. Maddison, I have a very deep interest in your husband's affairs. I have many bad qualities, but disloyalty is not one of them. Your husband went out of his way to warn me, at a moment when he knew the police were coming to arrest me. If ever there was a white and wholesome man, that man is Luke Maddison. I ought not to have asked you the question and I could not very well expect a satisfactory answer. The only thing I am anxious to know is this: have you any idea where your husband is?"

"Do you wish to find him?" she challenged.

He shook his head.

"No, but I'd like to know exactly where he is. I have a very special reason for asking this. Is he in London?"

She shook her head.

"He's in Spain at the moment, but I'm afraid I cannot give you the address."

"Mr. Morrell—is he in Spain? Pardon me, Mrs. Maddison, but if I have a reason for asking you the one question, I have a double important reason."

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