

The Man in Lower Ten

By

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1. I Go To Pittsburg

McKnight is gradually taking over the criminal end of the business. I never liked it, and since the strange case of the man in lower ten, I have been a bit squeamish. Given a case like that, where you can build up a network of clues that absolutely incriminate three entirely different people, only one of whom can be guilty, and your faith in circumstantial evidence dies of overcrowding. I never see a shivering, white-faced wretch in the prisoners' dock that I do not hark back with shuddering horror to the strange events on the Pullman car Ontario, between Washington and Pittsburg, on the night of September ninth, last.

McKnight could tell the story a great deal better than I, although he can not spell three consecutive words correctly. But, while he has imagination and humor, he is lazy.

"It didn't happen to me, anyhow," he protested, when I put it up to him. "And nobody cares for second-hand thrills. Besides, you want the unvarnished and ungarnished truth, and I'm no hand for that. I'm a lawyer."

So am I, although there have been times when my assumption in that particular has been disputed. I am unmarried, and just old enough to dance with the grown-up little sisters of the girls I used to know. I am fond of outdoors, prefer horses to the aforesaid grown-up little sisters, am without sentiment (am crossed out and was substituted.-Ed.) and completely ruled and frequently routed by my housekeeper, an elderly widow.

In fact, of all the men of my acquaintance, I was probably the most prosaic, the least adventurous, the one man in a hundred who would be likely to go without a deviation from the normal through the orderly procession of the seasons, summer suits to winter flannels, golf to bridge.

So it was a queer freak of the demons of chance to perch on my unsusceptible thirty-year-old chest, tie me up with a crime, ticket me with a love affair, and start me on that sensational and not always respectable journey that ended so surprisingly less than three weeks later in the firm's private office. It had been the most remarkable period of my life. I would neither give it up nor live it again under any inducement, and yet all that I lost was some twenty yards off my drive!

It was really McKnight's turn to make the next journey. I had a tournament at Chevy Chase for Saturday, and a short yacht cruise planned for Sunday, and when a man has been grinding at statute law for a week, he needs relaxation. But McKnight begged off. It was not the first time he had shirked that summer in order to run down to Richmond, and I was surly about it. But this time he had a new excuse. "I wouldn't be able to look after the business if I did go," he said. He has a sort of wide-eyed frankness that makes one

ashamed to doubt him. "I'm always car sick crossing the mountains. It's a fact, Lollie. See-sawing over the peaks does it. Why, crossing the Alleghany Mountains has the Gulf Stream to Bermuda beaten to a frazzle."

So I gave him up finally and went home to pack. He came later in the evening with his machine, the Cannonball, to take me to the station, and he brought the forged notes in the Bronson case.

"Guard them with your life," he warned me. "They are more precious than honor. Sew them in your chest protector, or wherever people keep valuables. I never keep any. I'll not be happy until I see Gentleman Andy doing the lockstep."

He sat down on my clean collars, found my cigarettes and struck a match on the mahogany bed post with one movement.

"Where's the Pirate?" he demanded. The Pirate is my housekeeper, Mrs Klopton, a very worthy woman, so labeled - and libeled - because of a ferocious pair of eyes and what McKnight called a bucaneeing nose. I quietly closed the door into the hall.

"Keep your voice down, Richey," I said. "She is looking for the evening paper to see if it is going to rain. She has my raincoat and an umbrella waiting in the hall."

The collars being damaged beyond repair, he left them and went to the window. He stood there for some time, staring at the blackness that represented the wall of the house next door.

"It's raining now," he said over his shoulder, and closed the window and the shutters. Something in his voice made me glance up, but he was watching me, his hands idly in his pockets.

"Who lives next door?" he inquired in a perfunctory tone, after a pause. I was packing my razor.

"House is empty," I returned absently. "If the landlord would put it in some sort of shape -"

"Did you put those notes in your pocket?" he broke

"Yes." I was impatient. "Along with my certificates of registration, baptism and vaccination. Whoever wants them will have to steal my coat to get them."

"Well, I would move them, if I were you. Somebody in the next house was confoundedly anxious to see where you put them. Somebody right at that window opposite."

I scoffed at the idea, but nevertheless I moved the papers, putting them in my traveling-bag, well down at the bottom. McKnight watched me uneasily.

"I have a hunch that you are going to have trouble," he said, as I locked the alligator bag. "Darned if I like starting anything important on Friday."

"You have a congenital dislike to start anything on any old day," I retorted, still sore from my lost Saturday. "And if you knew the owner of that house as I do you would know that if there was any one at that window he is paying rent for the privilege."

Mrs. Klopton rapped at the door and spoke discreetly from the hall.

"Did Mr. McKnight bring the evening paper?" she inquired.

"Sorry, but I didn't, Mrs. Klopton," McKnight called. "The Cubs won, three to nothing." He listened, grinning, as she moved away with little irritated rustles of her black silk gown.

I finished my packing, changed my collar and was ready to go. Then very cautiously we put out the light and opened the shutters. The window across was merely a deeper black in the darkness. It was closed and dirty. And yet, probably owing to Richey's suggestion, I had an uneasy sensation of eyes staring across at me. The next moment we were at the door, poised for flight.

"We'll have to run for it," I said in a whisper. "She's down there with a package of some sort, sandwiches probably. And she's threatened me with overshoes for a month. Ready now!"

I had a kaleidoscopic view of Mrs. Klopton in the lower hall, holding out an armful of such traveling impedimenta as she deemed essential, while beside her, Euphemia, the colored housemaid, grinned over a white-wrapped box.

"Awfully sorry-no time-back Sunday," I panted over my shoulder. Then the door closed and the car was moving away.

McKnight bent forward and stared at the facade of the empty house next door as we passed. It was black, staring, mysterious, as empty buildings are apt to be.

"I'd like to hold a post-mortem on that corpse of a house," he said thoughtfully. "By George, I've a notion to get out and take a look."

"Somebody after the brass pipes," I scoffed. "House has been empty for a year."

With one hand on the steering wheel McKnight held out the other for my cigarette case. "Perhaps," he said; "but I don't see what she would want with brass pipe."

"A woman!" I laughed outright. "You have been looking too hard at the picture in the back of your watch, that's all. There's an experiment like that: if you stare long enough - "

But McKnight was growing sulky: he sat looking rigidly ahead, and he did not speak again until he brought the Cannonball to a stop at the station. Even then it was only a perfunctory remark. He went through the gate with me, and with five minutes to spare, we lounged and smoked in the train shed. My mind had slid away from my surroundings and had wandered to a polo pony that I couldn't afford and intended to buy anyhow. Then McKnight shook off his taciturnity.

"For heaven's sake, don't look so martyred," he burst out; "I know you've done all the traveling this summer. I know you're missing a game to-morrow. But don't be a patient mother; confound it, I have to go to Richmond on Sunday. I - I want to see a girl."

"Oh, don't mind me," I observed politely. "Personally, I wouldn't change places with you. What's her name - North? South?"

"West," he snapped. "Don't try to be funny. And all I have to say, Blakeley, is that if you ever fall in love I hope you make an egregious ass of yourself."

In view of what followed, this came rather close to prophecy.

The trip west was without incident. I played bridge with a furniture dealer from Grand Rapids, a sales agent for a Pittsburg iron firm and a young professor from an eastern college. I won three rubbers out of four, finished what cigarettes McKnight had left me, and went to bed at one o'clock. It was growing cooler, and the rain had ceased. Once, toward morning, I wakened with a start, for no apparent reason, and sat bolt upright. I had an uneasy feeling that some one had been looking at me, the same sensation I had experienced earlier in the evening at the window. But I could feel the bag with the notes, between me and the window, and with my arm thrown over it for security, I lapsed again into slumber. Later, when I tried to piece together the fragments of that journey, I remembered that my coat, which had been folded and placed beyond my restless tossing, had been rescued in the morning from a heterogeneous jumble of blankets, evening papers and cravat, had been shaken out with profanity and donned with wrath. At the time, nothing occurred to me but the necessity of writing to the Pullman Company and asking them if they ever traveled in their own cars. I even formulated some of the letter.

"If they are built to scale, why not take a man of ordinary stature as your unit?" I wrote mentally. "I can not fold together like the traveling cup with which I drink your abominable water."

I was more cheerful after I had had a cup of coffee in the Union Station. It was too early to attend to business, and I lounged in the restaurant and hid behind the morning papers. As I had expected, they had got hold of my visit and its object. On the first page was a staring announcement that the forged papers in the Bronson case had been brought to Pittsburg. Underneath, a telegram from Washington stated that Lawrence Blakeley, of Blakeley and McKnight, had left for Pittsburg the night before, and that, owing to the approaching trial of the Bronson case and the illness of John Gilmore, the Pittsburg

millionaire, who was the chief witness for the prosecution, it was supposed that the visit was intimately concerned with the trial.

I looked around apprehensively. There were no reporters yet in sight, and thankful to have escaped notice I paid for my breakfast and left. At the cab-stand I chose the least dilapidated hansom I could find, and giving the driver the address of the Gilmore residence, in the East end, I got in.

I was just in time. As the cab turned and rolled off, a slim young man in a straw hat separated himself from a little group of men and hurried toward us.

"Hey! Wait a minute there!" he called, breaking into a trot.

But the cabby did not hear, or perhaps did not care to. We jogged comfortably along, to my relief, leaving the young man far behind. I avoid reporters on principle, having learned long ago that I am an easy mark for a clever interviewer.

It was perhaps nine o'clock when I left the station. Our way was along the boulevard which hugged the side of one of the city's great hills. Far below, to the left, lay the railroad tracks and the seventy times seven looming stacks of the mills. The white mist of the river, the grays and blacks of the smoke blended into a half-revealing haze, dotted here and there with fire. It was unlovely, tremendous. Whistler might have painted it with its pathos, its majesty, but he would have missed what made it infinitely suggestive - the rattle and roar of iron on iron, the rumble of wheels, the throbbing beat, against the ears, of fire and heat and brawn welding prosperity.

Something of this I voiced to the grim old millionaire who was responsible for at least part of it. He was propped up in bed in his East end home, listening to the market reports read by a nurse, and he smiled a little at my enthusiasm.

"I can't see much beauty in it myself," he said. "But it's our badge of prosperity. The full dinner pail here means a nose that looks like a flue. Pittsburg without smoke wouldn't be Pittsburg, any more than New York prohibition would be New York. Sit down for a few minutes, Mr. Blakeley. Now, Miss Gardner, Westinghouse Electric."

The nurse resumed her reading in a monotonous voice. She read literally and without understanding, using initials and abbreviations as they came. But the shrewd old man followed her easily. Once, however, he stopped her.

"D-o is ditto," he said gently, "not do."

As the nurse droned along, I found myself looking curiously at a photograph in a silver frame on the bed-side table. It was the picture of a girl in white, with her hands clasped loosely before her. Against the dark background her figure stood out slim and young. Perhaps it was the rather grim environment, possibly it was my mood, but although as a general thing photographs of young girls make no appeal to me, this one did. I found my

eyes straying back to it. By a little finesse I even made out the name written across the corner, "Alison."

Mr. Gilmore lay back among his pillows and listened to the nurse's listless voice. But he was watching me from under his heavy eyebrows, for when the reading was over, and we were alone, he indicated the picture with a gesture.

"I keep it there to remind myself that I am an old man," he said. "That is my granddaughter, Alison West."

I expressed the customary polite surprise, at which, finding me responsive, he told me his age with a chuckle of pride. More surprise, this time genuine. From that we went to what he ate for breakfast and did not eat for luncheon, and then to his reserve power, which at sixty-five becomes a matter for thought. And so, in a wide circle, back to where we started, the picture.

"Father was a rascal," John Gilmore said, picking up the frame. "The happiest day of my life was when I knew he was safely dead in bed and not hanged. If the child had looked like him, I - well, she doesn't. She's a Gilmore, every inch. Supposed to look like me."

"Very noticeably," I agreed soberly.

I had produced the notes by that time, and replacing the picture Mr. Gilmore gathered his spectacles from beside it. He went over the four notes methodically, examining each carefully and putting it down before he picked up the next. Then he leaned back and took off his glasses.

"They're not so bad," he said thoughtfully. "Not so bad. But I never saw them before. That's my unofficial signature. I am inclined to think - " he was speaking partly to himself - "to think that he has got hold of a letter of mine, probably to Alison. Bronson was a friend of her rapsallion of a father."

I took Mr. Gilmore's deposition and put it into my traveling-bag with the forged notes. When I saw them again, almost three weeks later, they were unrecognizable, a mass of charred paper on a copper ashtray. In the interval other and bigger things had happened: the Bronson forgery case had shrunk beside the greater and more imminent mystery of the man in lower ten. And Alison West had come into the story and into my life.

2. A Torn Telegram

I lunched alone at the Gilmore house, and went back to the city at once. The sun had lifted the mists, and a fresh summer wind had cleared away the smoke pall. The boulevard was full of cars flying countryward for the Saturday half-holiday, toward golf and tennis, green fields and babbling girls. I gritted my teeth and thought of McKnight at Richmond, visiting the lady with the geographical name. And then, for the first time, I associated John Gilmore's granddaughter with the "West" that McKnight had irritably flung at me.

I still carried my traveling-bag, for McKnight's vision at the window of the empty house had not been without effect. I did not transfer the notes to my pocket, and, if I had, it would not have altered the situation later. Only the other day McKnight put this very thing up to me.

"I warned you," he reminded me. "I told you there were queer things coming, and to be on your guard. You ought to have taken your revolver."

"It would have been of exactly as much use as a bucket of snow in Africa," I retorted. "If I had never closed my eyes, or if I had kept my finger on the trigger of a six-shooter (which is novelesque for revolver), the result would have been the same. And the next time you want a little excitement with every variety of thrill thrown in, I can put you by way of it. You begin by getting the wrong berth in a Pullman car, and end - "

"Oh, I know how it ends," he finished shortly. "Don't you suppose the whole thing's written on my spinal marrow?"

But I am wandering again. That is the difficulty with the unprofessional story-teller: he yaws back and forth and can't keep in the wind; he drops his characters overboard when he hasn't any further use for them and drowns them; he forgets the coffee-pot and the frying-pan and all the other small essentials, and, if he carries a love affair, he mutters a fervent "Allah be praised" when he lands them, drenched with adventures, at the matrimonial dock at the end of the final chapter.

I put in a thoroughly unsatisfactory afternoon. Time dragged eternally. I dropped in at a summer vaudeville, and bought some ties at a haberdasher's. I was bored but unexpectant; I had no premonition of what was to come. Nothing unusual had ever happened to me; friends of mine had sometimes sailed the high seas of adventure or skirted the coasts of chance, but all of the shipwrecks had occurred after a woman passenger had been taken on. "Ergo," I had always said "no women!" I repeated it to myself that evening almost savagely, when I found my thoughts straying back to the picture of John Gilmore's granddaughter. I even argued as I ate my solitary dinner at a downtown restaurant.

"Haven't you troubles enough," I reflected, "without looking for more? Hasn't Bad News gone lame, with a matinee race booked for next week? Otherwise aren't you comfortable?"

Isn't your house in order? Do you want to sell a pony in order to have the library done over in mission or the drawing-room in gold? Do you want somebody to count the empty cigarette boxes lying around every morning?"

Lay it to the long idle afternoon, to the new environment, to anything you like, but I began to think that perhaps I did. I was confoundedly lonely. For the first time in my life its even course began to waver: the needle registered warning marks on the matrimonial seismograph, lines vague enough, but lines.

My alligator bag lay at my feet, still locked. While I waited for my coffee I leaned back and surveyed the people incuriously. There were the usual couples intent on each other: my new state of mind made me regard them with tolerance. But at the next table, where a man and woman dined together, a different atmosphere prevailed. My attention was first caught by the woman's face. She had been speaking earnestly across the table, her profile turned to me. I had noticed casually her earnest manner, her somber clothes, and the great mass of odd, bronze-colored hair on her neck. But suddenly she glanced toward me and the utter hopelessness - almost tragedy - of her expression struck me with a shock. She half closed her eyes and drew a long breath, then she turned again to the man across the table.

Neither one was eating. He sat low in his chair, his chin on his chest, ugly folds of thick flesh protruding over his collar. He was probably fifty, bald, grotesque, sullen, and yet not without a suggestion of power. But he had been drinking; as I looked, he raised an unsteady hand and summoned a waiter with a wine list.

The young woman bent across the table and spoke again quickly. She had unconsciously raised her voice. Not beautiful, in her earnestness and stress she rather interested me. I had an idle inclination to advise the waiter to remove the bottled temptation from the table. I wonder what would have happened if I had? Suppose Harrington had not been intoxicated when he entered the Pullman car Ontario that night!

For they were about to make a journey, I gathered, and the young woman wished to go alone. I drank three cups of coffee, which accounted for my wakefulness later, and shamelessly watched the tableau before me. The woman's protest evidently went for nothing: across the table the man grunted monosyllabic replies and grew more and more lowering and sullen. Once, during a brief unexpected pianissimo in the music, her voice came to me sharply:

"If I could only see him in time!" she was saying. "Oh, it's terrible!"

In spite of my interest I would have forgotten the whole incident at once, erased it from my mind as one does the inessentials and clutterings of memory, had I not met them again, later that evening, in the Pennsylvania station. The situation between them had not visibly altered: the same dogged determination showed in the man's face, but the young woman - daughter or wife? I wondered - had drawn down her veil and I could only suspect what white misery lay beneath.

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