

The MOUTHPIECE

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By EDGAR WALLACE and ROBERT CURTIS

CHAPTER 44

JUST AS Jacqueline felt that she could not draw another breath when Joplin's huge hands began to squeeze her throat, the pressure was relaxed and she sank into a limp heap on the floor.

"That's what you'll get—see?" came Joplin's voice.

Jacqueline attempted no reply, and after a moment the man went on.

"Listen," he said. "That's what you'll get if you don't go overboard. Twenty-five hundred dollars I'll get for doing it. Get me?"

He stared her with his foot. "Get me?" he repeated. "That's the offer the gentleman made—\$2,500 to put you out and keep me mouth shut."

Jacqueline gazed at him with horrified eyes.

"You were offered \$2,500 to—get rid of me?"

"Ah."

"By Colonel Lutman?"

"No names," said Joplin. "Incog, see? Turned it down, I did. Killing ain't my line. Twenty-five dollars a week, I said, and I'll keep 'er till she pegs out—but no killing. That's me. Gentle, I am."

Jacqueline's fingers touched her throat.

"But no larks—see?" added Joplin. "No hollering. No whistling. No nothing. Twenty-five dollars is \$25, and I ain't losing it. Any more larks and I'll . . ." He raised his hands again and moved them toward her throat. "Get me? And then overboard you go. Twenty-five hundred dollars—see?"

He turned, lumbered to the door, and paused.

"Get me?"

Jacqueline nodded.

"Well, that's nuff, then."

The girl climbed back into the bunk, lay down and closed her eyes.

Mrs. Smith was not in the best of moods. To begin with, dawn, when she opened her eyes, greeted her with a reminder that the pleasant future to which her thoughts had lately flown as soon as she awoke in the morning, no longer existed as a possibility.

Jacqueline, with her blunt refusal to marry Jim Asson, had completely shattered all prospect of the comfortable, carefree life to which her mother had been looking forward, and the future now simply would not bear looking into.

Mrs. Smith, with an uneasy feeling that fate was about to deal her another blow, set down the cup of tea and proceeded to investigate. The fact that Jacqueline's pajamas were not in their case on the pillow caused her a quick stab of fear and sent her hurrying to the dressing table. And there she received another stab. Brushes, comb and hand mirror were missing. She crossed to the wardrobe and peered inside. Several frocks, she realized, were not there; and when the chest of drawers revealed that most of her daughter's underclothes had disappeared, there seemed to Mrs. Smith to be nothing for it but to believe the incredible. Jacqueline, without a word of explanation or warning, had gone away. But why? And where?

It struck Mrs. Smith with sudden devastating force that Charles Stuckey might well be the cause of all the disasters that had overtaken her since she had so satisfactorily arranged her own and Jacqueline's future. And the more she thought about it, the more feasible that explanation became. Jacqueline obviously liked the man. Even at Cobenzil, when he had worn those preposterous plus-fours and that ridiculous hat, she had been far more charming to him than she had ever been to Jim Asson, and it had been quite evident that the Stuckey person had been very much attracted to her. She remembered now that during the journey to England Jacqueline had taken no notice of Jim and had



Charles gave her a quick glance of surprise

spent most of the time talking to Stuckey.

That morning at the office, too—the way Jacqueline had insisted on speaking to him alone, and the way Stuckey had backed her up. She should have realized then that there was something afoot and have refused to stand any nonsense. They probably hadn't discussed the marriage settlement at all—had just got rid of the others on that pretext so that they could have a little time together and lay their plans.

In moments of crisis Mrs. Smith was rarely at a loss to know what she should do. Long experience of recurrent financial crises in Continental hotels had made her both resolute and quick-witted, and in this crisis she decided instantly what must be done. She must go to Stuckey's office. That was obviously the first step. If he really had married Jacqueline, he would have to listen to what she had to say to him, and answer a few questions. Mrs. Smith felt that as Jacqueline's mother she had a right to know what sort of an income Charles Stuckey made, and what sort of an allowance her daughter was to receive.

Mrs. Smith as a rule could be relied upon to keep her head in an emergency, but in the present one she so far lost her accustomed poise as to forget the depleted state of the family exchequer and traveled to Rotherhithe by taxi. But long before the cab stopped outside the office of Messrs. Stuckey & Stuckey she was quite herself again. As she entered the office and Mr. Bells rose to attend to her, she was dignity personified and self-possession incarnate.

"Is Mr. Stuckey in?"

"He is, madam," replied Mr. Bells.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Smith, as though the fact of Mr. Stuckey's presence caused her supreme satisfaction. "Then please tell him, my good man, that I wish to see him."

"Mr. Stuckey is engaged, madam—began Mr. Bells, but Mrs. Smith cut him short.

"Mr. Stuckey will see me," she said. "Tell him it is Mrs. Smith."

Then, as Mr. Bells hesitated, she crossed to the door of Charles' private room and grasped the knob.

"There's a taxi waiting at the door," she said. "Please pay the

man and dismiss him." And before Mr. Bells had even begun to search his mental archives for some precedent and to consider whether such a payment, if permissible at all, should be made from petty cash or as a loan from his own pocket, Mrs. Smith had opened the door and sailed in.

"She found Charles seated at his desk; and beside the desk, without his eyeglasses or any trace of his usual genial smile—he was, in fact, scowling and raising his voice as if he were conducting a heated argument as she entered—stood Colonel Lutman. As she came into the room, however, the Colonel suddenly stopped speaking, and smile and monocle slipped into their accustomed places.

"My dear Mrs. Smith," he began, "this is a most unexpected pleasure that must be done. She must go to Stuckey's office. That was obviously the first step. If he really had married Jacqueline, he would have to listen to what she had to say to him, and answer a few questions. Mrs. Smith felt that as Jacqueline's mother she had a right to know what sort of an income Charles Stuckey made, and what sort of an allowance her daughter was to receive.

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JACQUELINE lay back on the bunk of the barge and tried to think clearly. It seemed quite obvious to her that the only person who could possibly be responsible for what had happened to her was Colonel Lutman. Mrs. Joplin's denial of all knowledge of him meant nothing; it was merely part of the service she rendered in exchange for \$25 a week. Colonel Lutman, if he had not actually kidnaped her himself, had undoubtedly arranged it, and Jim Asson, perhaps, had had a hand in the business. Only those two could have any reason for kidnaping her.

But when she came to ask herself what their object could be, she found it hard to find a convincing reason. They wanted her to marry Jim Asson, and their reason for that she had discovered. She was to marry Jim, having signed that deed transferring all her money to him, and the Colonel, no doubt, was to have his rakeoff. A pretty little scheme, and it had very nearly come off.

She sat up in the bunk, listening intently. No sound reached her, but the lapping of the water against the barge, and she concluded that the Joplins had retired for the night. Very cautiously she climbed out of the bunk, first slipping off her shoes, and crept silently across to the door. She stooped and put an eye close to the keyhole. There was no key in it, and as she straightened herself her eyes were alight with excitement. The Joplins, evidently, were satisfied that she would give no more trouble and were trusting to the stretch of dark swirling water that lay between her and the shore to keep guard over her for them.

She opened the door a fraction of an inch and paused. She heard nothing, and opened the door another fraction of an inch. The faintest squeak came from the hinges, and for a few moments she was rigid, straining for the least sound. None came, but if the door was going to squeak, she told herself, it would be asking for trouble to open it slowly. She must fling it open suddenly and slip through it and up the stairs before the Joplins, if they heard the squeak, had time to reach her. Once up the stairs, she would not hesitate this time.

With a sudden sweep she flung the door wide open. As she did so there came a clatter of metal and she stepped aside just in time to avoid a large zinc bath which, with a couple of heavy iron sauce pans and a frying pan in close attendance, toppled off the chair in which they had been balanced against the door, and crashed to the floor. The next moment Alfred Joplin loomed up from the direction of the steps. Somehow, without Mrs. Joplin and her expansive smile, he looked a great deal more terrifying as he stood there, staring at her with sullen, resentful eyes. Jacqueline was certain that if he came any nearer to her she would scream.

But he came no nearer. He just made out the outline of the boat. She watched it anxiously as it drew nearer. If it kept to its present course it would pass quite close to her—not more than a dozen yards away, she calculated—and one good yell should be enough to attract the attention of its occupants. Better, perhaps, to whistle—one of those shrill piercing whistles with two fingers in her mouth which, after much labor, she had learned to produce under the instruction of her father and the unqualified disapproval of her mother. They'd be sure to hear a whistle.

She waited, with her fingers in readiness and her face close to the window, until the boat was almost opposite and she could see the figures of three men seated in it, and then her fingers slipped into her mouth and an ear-splitting whistle came shrilling out of it.

She saw the men turn their heads, glancing around as though uncertain from which direction the sound had come. She put her fingers into her mouth again and took a deep breath. But before the sound had left her lips, hands were suddenly clamped onto her shoulders, and she was jerked violently backward. She staggered, clutched wildly, and overbalancing the chair, crashed to the floor. Instantly she was on her feet, to find Alfred Joplin, his lips twitching and his eyes dark with fury, facing her. She saw that his hands were clenching and unclenching nervously, and as she stared at them, feeling that she dared not take her eyes off them, she saw him raise them, half-open, the knotted fingers with their short broad nails curled as if about to grasp something, and move slowly toward her. She glanced at his face, saw his tongue pass across his lips, read murder in his eyes, and only with a tremendous effort stopped herself from screaming.

Suddenly, as he took another step toward her, she seized the chair with both hands and swung it above her head.

"Come one step farther," she gasped, "and I'll use it."

Joplin took no notice. He took another step toward her, and as he did so Jacqueline swung the chair and brought it crashing with all her strength on his head.

For an instant Joplin wavered, and then his hand shot out, grabbed the chair, wrenched it from her grasp, and sent it clattering across the room. Once again he moved toward her. Jacqueline, her gaze fixed on those curling fingers, backed away until, as the back of her head reached the edge of the bunk, she could retreat no farther, and she covered into the corner. The next moment she felt Joplin's hands around her throat, encircling it like a steel band, squeezing relentlessly until she gasped for breath; her head seemed bursting and great waves of color went swirling across her vision.

Gradually the throb of the engine grew louder, and very suddenly, so it seemed to Jacqueline, it came into her range of vision.

It was some time before her patience was rewarded, and then at last she heard the chugging of a motor boat. The sound was faint, and though she twisted her head this way and that, she could not get a glimpse of it. It might, of course, be right across the river close to the bank, in which case it would be useless to shout, and she would have to wait in the hope that another might come along later, close enough to give her a chance of making herself heard.

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FOR QUICKER HEADACHE RELIEF STANBACK 10¢-25¢

NOTICE OF SALE OF LAND.

By virtue of the power of sale contained in a Deed of Trust executed by C. H. Hight, dated December 17, 1927, and recorded in the office of the Register of Deeds of Vance County in Book 140 at page 563, default having been made in the payment notes therein secured, on request of the holder of the same, I shall sell for cash by public auction, at the Court House door in Henderson, N. C., to the highest bidder, at 12 o'clock Noon, on Monday, the 24th day of May, 1937, the following described property:

Begin at a point on the N. E. side of Cooper Ave., 290.87 ft. from Chestnut St., corner between lots 55 and 56; thence N 54 degrees 15' E 203.48 ft. to a pin on an alley, corner between lots 67 and 68, thence along said alley S 35 degrees 18' E 21.99 ft. to a pin corner between lots 68 and 69; run thence S 54 degrees 15' W 203.28 ft. to Cooper Ave. corner between lots 64 and 55, thence along Cooper Ave. in the direction of Chestnut St. N 35 degrees 45' W 25 ft. to the point of beginning, being lots 55 and 68 of the Cooper subdivision.

B. H. PERRY, Trustee, Henderson, N. C., April 19, 1937.

EXECUTOR'S NOTICE.

Having qualified as Executors of the estate of R. T. Walston, deceased, late of Vance County, North Carolina, this is to notify all persons having claims against the estate of said deceased to exhibit them to the undersigned, at Henderson, N. C. or Drewry, N. C. on or before the 27th day of April 1938, or this notice will be pleaded in bar to their recovery. All persons indebted to the estate will please make immediate settlement.

This 26th of April, 1937. MARY A. WALSON, H. E. BREWER, Executors. Kittrell & Kittrell, Attorneys.

ADMINISTRATRIX NOTICE.

North Carolina: Having qualified as administratrix of the estate of Joseph B. Jones, late of the County of Vance, this is to notify all persons holding claims against said estate to present them to the undersigned administratrix on or before the 20th day of April, 1938, or this notice will be pleaded in bar of their recovery. All persons indebted to said estate will make immediate settlement.

This 19th day of April, 1937. LAURA E. JONES, Administratrix.

NOTICE OF SUMMONS.

In The Superior Court. State of North Carolina: County of Vance: Mary Roebuck, Jr. vs. Earl Roebuck, Jr. The defendant, Earl Roebuck, Jr., will take notice that an action entitled as above has been commenced in the Superior Court of Vance County, North Carolina, for the purpose of obtaining an Absolute Divorce on the grounds of two years separation, as provided by the Consolidated Statutes. And the said defendant will further take notice that he is required to appear at the office of the Clerk of the Superior Court of Vance County, at the Courthouse in Henderson, N. C., on the 26th day of May, 1937, and answer or demur to the complaint in said action, or the plaintiff will apply to the Court for the relief demanded in said complaint.

This 26th day of April, 1937. E. O. FALKNER, Clerk Superior Court, Vance County, Gholson & Gholson, Attorneys for Plaintiff.

NOTICE OF SALE.

Under the direction and by the authority of the order signed by the Clerk of the Superior Court of Vance County in the Special Proceeding entitled "Henry Moss, Administrator of Fletcher H. Moss, deceased, vs. Robert Moss, E. C. Moss, William Moss, Ellen Moss, Rebecca Moss, Page Blanks, Mary Moss Kearney, all minors, Carl Kearney, and Mary H. Moss, widow," which is upon the Special Proceeding Docket in the office of the said Clerk, the undersigned Commissioner will offer for sale, by public auction, at the Courthouse door in Henderson, N. C., at 12 o'clock, Noon, on June 8, 1937, the following described real estate:

Beginning opposite a stone on the North side of that Henderson and Gillburg Road, run thence North 84-10 E 855.5 feet to a stone in an old Hedge-row; thence along the old Hedge-row N 16-30 E