

GUNMAN'S BLUFF

By Edgar Wallace

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was a stupid question to day?"

"Yes, yes," Luke's usually gentle voice was harsh. "Tell the manager it is alright."

"I told him yesterday, as a matter of fact," Mr. Stiles was inclined to linger on the subject which was hateful to the other. In desperation Luke reverted to the question of the Gulanga Oil Concession, and for once Mr. Stiles' father interest in the business irritated him.

"Of course, sir. I know that Maddison is as sound as a bell of brass, but there no getting away from the fact that we have been making rather heavy losses during the past six months, and I am afraid I shall have to call upon your reserves. Personally, he went on, oblivious of Luke's growing resentment, "I have always believed we made a mistake in not selling out to a joint stock concern. In private banking business the personal security plays too big a part for my liking."

Mercifully the house phone rang at that moment. Luke snatched up the receiver and listened with a frown.

"Yes, show him in please."

And as he replaced the receiver: "I am seeing Mr. Morell and I do not wish to be interrupted," he said.

Mr. Stiles made a little grimace. He had been all his life in the firm of Maddisons & Sons, and he did not feel called upon to displease his dislike of the caller.

"There is something about that fellow I dislike very much Mr. Maddison I hope we are not going to carry his account?"

Luke shook his head and nodded toward the door.

Mr. Morell came into an atmosphere which he, sensitive in such matters, realized was charged with hostility. Nevertheless he was his smiling self, and laid his carefully brushed silk hat upon the table. Luke did not fail to notice that he wore a mourning tie, and that for some was a further strain upon his jangled nerves.

"Sit down, will you?" His manner and voice were brusque.

"You were a friend of poor Rex's?"

Danty inclined his head sorrowfully.

"Yes, I was completely in his confidence," he said. "I think I told you the day following his unfortunate—"

Luke cut short the recollection.

"Were you so much in his confidence that you accompanied him to the Northern and Southern Bank three days ago when he cashed a check for eighteen thousand five hundred pounds?"

Danty opened his eyes wide in well-stimulated surprise.

"Why of course," he said. "Rex had made very heavy losses in the City and I advised him to see you. I understand you gave him a check for that amount."

"Did he tell you that?" Luke's blue eyes did not leave the man's face.

"Certainly. Why, what's wrong I saw the check myself."

There was an uncomfortable pause, and then:

"Did you see him sign it?" asked Luke deliberately.

Danty's gaze did not falter.

"I am afraid I do not understand you," he said evenly. "I saw him endorse it—"

"My name was forged to it. I did not give Rex a check for that amount. I have been making inquiries. I find that he was heavily involved in a derelict West African gold-mining syndicate, most of the shares of which you bought for a song less than a year ago. He has been buying these shares on margin and they have been steadily dropping in value. On the day he paid you eighteen thousand five hundred pounds there came another amount for a larger amount."

Danty's heart sank though he gave no visible evidence of his perturbation. This man knew more than he had dreamed could be known. Here was a crisis in Mr. Morell's affairs which might easily lead him to ruin and undo all those fine schemes of his.

"I do not exactly know what you are suggesting," he said. "My interest in the company is a

very slight one, and I was horrified when I learned that Rex had been gambling in the shares. I give you the fullest permission to make any investigation you wish."

Luke opened the drawer of his desk and took out a check, by Mr. Bird Danty.

From where he sat Danty thought the signature was a tolerably good forgery. He had thought so when Rex brought the check to him. It is the simplest thing in the world to forge a name and so far as he had been able to judge there were no flaws in Rex Lefere's essay in that dangerous game.

"You realize what is wrong with this check?" asked Luke.

The other shook his head.

"Are you suggesting that I knew the check was forged?" he asked.

Before he could reply there was a tap at the door and Luke looked up angrily.

"Come in," he said.

It was the apologetic manager, him.

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Maddison, but will you see Mr. Bird of Scotland Yard?"

In spite of his self-possession Danty half rose from his seat. The Sparrow was the last man in the world he wanted to meet that morning.

Luke thought for a moment.

"Just a moment."

He rose and opened the door leading to the corridor.

"I shall want to see you again about this check, Mr. Morell," he said.

"Why not see me now?"

It was a challenge, but Luke could sense its insincerity.

"Mr. Bird has come to see me on quite another matter," he said. "In due course we will interview him together."

He closed the door on his visitor as the Sparrow was shown in through the other door. Mr. Bird came heavily into the room and favored every corner with a long scrutiny.

"Havin' a visitor, Mr. Maddison? I thought I saw somebody come in whilst I was waiting in the street outside."

Luke nodded curtly.

"Mr. Danton Morell," he said. "Do you know him?"

The Sparrow smiled.

"As one knows the Lord Mayor—from a distance. I'm humble. You never find me bargain' in on society. I've had one dress suit seventeen years an' wear it twice a year—once for the Police Dinner and once to give the moths a cold."

"Do you know anything about him?"

The Sparrow's wide smile grew wider.

"His name an' address—an' that's as much as any policeman wants to know, about anybody. Bad business, this young Lefere case, Mr. Maddison. You don't want to appear in it I suppose?"

Luke looked at him startled.

"I? How on earth do I come into it?"

Mr. Bird coughed.

"Well you do and you don't," he said. "I happened to search the body an' the room. I found three loose checks on the Northern and Southern Bank—that's where you keep your private account, ain't it? An' this—"

Very leisurely he took out a fat and worn leather case from his pocket, laid it flat on the desk and rummaged in the inside. After a while he found what he was looking for—two folded sheets of paper evidently torn from a school exercise book. He smoothed the flat and Luke saw a succession of signatures, one under the other: "Luke Maddison—Luke Maddison"

"Looks almost as though you had been scribblin' absent-mindedly." The detective's shrewd eyes were on the young banker.

"But at the same time I couldn't imagine a business, in like you doin' anything so silly! If you'll excuse the liberty. I called at the Northern and Southern Bank yesterday, but they were reticent—reticent—is a good word—an' referred me to you. But by an underhanded an' despicable trick I found that young Mr. Lefere cashed a check the other day for eighteen thousand."

"Yes—I gave him a check for that amount."

For a second Luke was taken aback.

"If there were any reason for doing so, I could," he said coldly, "but I see no reason."

Mr. Bird was not abashed; he leaned his huge arms on the table, and when he spoke his voice was serious.

"I've no right to ask—I'm not the sort of man who would attempt to pull a bluff on a gentleman like you. I'll put my card on the table that check was met in notes and I want to know where those notes went. There's a bird in London I want to catch. I've got one of the best little cages for him that was ever built, an' while it's empty so's my heart. If that check was a forgery it might get the deceased a bad name but it would make it very easy for me to pull in a certain man for uttering."

"I'll tell you the truth, Mr. Maddison; I want that man's finger prints so much that I

wonder I don't knock him down in the street and take them!"

Luke's eyes were averted; he gave no sign until the detective had finished.

"I'm sorry I can't help you," he said. "The check was drawn by me and signed by me."

Mr. Bird arose with a sigh.

"You're too kind to the criminal classes, Mr. Maddison," he said. "No wonder Gunner Haynes thinks you're a good feller—six months he got yesterday for being a suspected person. What a man! When I tried to pump him about your friend he wouldn't let on that he knew him even."

"Morell?" Luke was thrown off his guard, as he saw by the Sparrow's grin.

"That's the name. What's the use of talking at cross-purposes? He's the—"

"I know nothing about Morell," Luke was emphatic. "He was a friend of Rex's—of Mr. Lefere's. I'd rather not discuss him."

The Sparrow sighed again and gathered up the papers on which the unfortunate Rex had practised the signature and stuffed them back into his pocket-book.

"Nobody helps the police," he said dolefully. "All hands are against the natural guardians of the children of the poor. I'll be getting along now."

He offered a limp hand and went heavily out of the room. The door had hardly closed behind the telephone rang, and for the first time since the tragedy Luke heard the voice of the woman he loved.

"Will you see me tomorrow, Luke?" Her voice was low.

"Now if I may—darling let me come to you now!"

But her level voice denied him. "Tomorrow—after this ghastly business. Luke, did Rex owe you any money?"

The unexpectedness of the question threw him off his balance, and when Luke Maddison was flurried he was invariably incoherent, for the same reason as others are incoherent in the circumstances—he thought too quickly for speech.

"Yes—but it wasn't worth discussing. He was heavily insured, you know and I don't think the policy is invalidated."

He heard the quick breath and grew panic-stricken.

"I was thinking of you—that there was no use of worrying about his affairs. He owes me practically nothing."

Before he could reply he heard the click of the hook being depressed.

"I see no reason in the world why the wedding should be postponed, Luke."

The hideous business of coroner's inquisition was only a day old, and an accountant's statement that the dead boy's affairs were involved was accepted and no details were asked.

Margaret Lefere could not understand herself; her own calm astonished her. Had she ever loved this suave man who stood before her, apparently agreeing, as though Rex were his dearest friend? Sometimes she was afraid that he would read her loathing of him in her eyes—she was amazed to find herself telling him now with the greatest calmness and in a tone that was sadly sweet, that she saw no reason why the ceremony should be postponed.

"My poor darling!"

He took her in his arms, and she did not resist. Rather, she raised her cold lips to his, and hated herself. But the Judas kiss was his not hers—that was tattered comfort.

"There is nothing in the world I would not do to make life a little more smooth for you," he saw saying. "If money could buy you happiness I would beggar myself!"

She smiled faintly at this. Here was a man ready to betray his gods.

He had ruined Rex; he had always hated him. She remembered half-forgotten phrases of his little irritated comments upon Rex's carelessness in financial matters.

He put her at arms length and scrutinized her a little sadly. The pallor and the soft shadows beneath her eyes gave her an unearthly loveliness.

"Naturally I have been worried sick. What a fool I was on the phone to talk of insurances—it was indecent. I just didn't know what to say—"

"Luke, are you awfully rich?"

She was always staggering him with questions like that.

"Why—yes, I suppose I am. The bank isn't doing terribly well—on the trading side. We are merchants as well, you know—but I have over half a million private fortune. I thought you knew."

She smiled faintly.

"I have never asked you. I'm worried about—poverty. We have been poor—desperately. My father left us nothing, poor dear. It must be wonderful to be so rich—to have command of money—never to be bothered about bills, never to feel the frantic urge to go out and earn something."

He was regarding her in open-eyed astonishment.

"But I never knew my dear how awful! I thought you had an income?"

She shook her head. This time she was not acting.

"If money will give you a sense of security, and of course it will, I'll—why I'd give you control of every cent I have in the world—"

He saw her incredulous smile and was angry with himself, as though in that gesture of unbelief he detected some reservation, some gesture of insincerity in his offer.

"Why not? Thousands of men put all their property in their wife's names. It's a sane thing to do—it keeps a man steady and it will make us real partners. Wait."

He was at the telephone—as eager, as enthusiastic as a boy pursuing some new and delight-

ful idea.

"Luke, is that your lawyer you're calling?"

Conscience overwhelmed her with a sudden fear; she realized for the first time the enormity of her treachery and was terrified.

"Yes Hilton—it is Luke Maddison speaking. . . you had the draft of the antenuptial contract? Well, include everything! You have the list of my securities? . . . Yes, all. And the cash in the bank—everything. My interest in Maddison's . . . no, I'm not mad!"

"You are!"

She was standing by him now, her face was white as death. The words came tremulously.

"You're mad, Luke—I didn't mean it."

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

NERVES

Went to Pieces

suffered a long time, before Cardui," says Mrs. Lillie Cardui, 130 "K" St., Anderson, S. C. was badly run-down in my nerves went to pieces, and I had to go to bed. I got so bad off, I could not have anybody walk on the floor of my room. The least little thing upset me. Sometimes I became hysterical. I had pains in my back and my head and limbs. I almost set me wild. One day I saw where a woman who had a trouble like my had been relieved by Cardui. I decided at once to try it. It helped me from the very first. I took Cardui regularly, for several months, and my improvement was so remarkable my family and friends were delighted. Try Cardui for your troubles.

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Elkin, N. C.

3 1-2 to 1

Lord Birkenhead, Chairman of the Greater London and Counties Trust, Ltd., visiting America on business, said:

"A cheap and abundant supply of electricity is our aim. We feel that this will have a good effect upon British industry and alleviate the unemployment problem, and place Great Britain in a better position to compete in the markets of the world."

"The superpower system has enormously extended the area in which energy is distributable and rendered possible the interchange of service with other power stations."

Is it an accident that the relative national wealth of the United States as against Great Britain, is almost the exact relationship of the relative per capita horsepower—three and one-half to one?

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Southern Public Utilities Company