

CHAPTER XVII THE BLACK SACHEL

When Josie reached the hotel it was nearly midnight. Half the lights in the office had been extinguished and behind the desk, reading a novel, the night clerk sprawled in an easy chair.

She hadn't seen the night clerk before. He was a sallow-faced boy, scarcely twenty years old, attired in a very striking suit of clothes and wearing a gorgeous jewelled scarf-pin in his cravat. As he read, he smoked a cigarette.

"Hello," said this brilliant individual, as Josie leaned over the counter and regarded him with a faint smile. "You're No. 43, I guess, and it's lucky old Boyle ain't here to read you a lecture--or to turn you out. He won't stand for unmarried lady guests bein' out till this hour, an' you may as well know it first as last."

"He's quite right," was Josie's calm reply. "I'll not do it again. My key, please!"

He rose reluctantly and gave her the key.

"Do you sit up all night?" she asked sweetly.

"I'm s'posed to," he answered in a tone less gruff, "but towards mornin' I snooze a little. Only way to pass the time, with noth'n' to do an' nobody to talk to. It's a beastly job, at the best, an' I'm goin' to quit it."

"Why don't you start a hotel of your own?" she suggested.

"You think you're kiddin' me, don't you? But I might even do that, if I wanted to," he asserted, glaring at her as if he challenged contradiction. "It ain't money that stops me, but hotel keepin' is a dog's life. I've made a bid for a cigar-store down the street, an' if they take me up, somebody can have this job."

"I see you're ambitious," said Josie. "Well, I hope you get the cigar-store. Good night, Mr.--"

"My name's Tom Linnet. I won't tell the ol' boy you was out so late. So long."

The elevator had stopped running, so Josie climbed the stairs and went thoughtfully to her room. Kauffman had preceded her. She heard him drop his shoes heavily upon the floor as he undressed.

She turned on the light and made some notes on her tablets, using the same queer characters that she always employed. The last note read: "Tom Linnet, night clerk at the Mansion House. New clothes; new jewelry. Has money. Recently

acquired, for no one with money would be a night clerk. Wants to quit his job and buy a cigar store. Query: Who staked Tom? And why?"

As she crawled into bed Josie reflected: "Mary Louise would be astonished if she knew what I have learned to-night. But then, I'm astonished myself. I feel like the boy who went fishing for sunfish and caught a whale."

Next morning she was up early, alert to continue her investigations. When she heard Mr. Kauffman go down to breakfast she took a bunch of pass-keys from her bag, went boldly through the hall to the door of 45, unlocked it with ease and walked in. A hurried glance showed her a large suitcase lying open upon a table. She examined its contents. One side was filled with samples of suspenders, the other with miscellaneous articles of male apparel.

Josie was not satisfied. She peered under the bed, softly opened all the drawers in the dresser and finally entered the closet. Here, on the rear shelf, a newspaper was placed in such manner as to hide from observation anything behind it. To an ordinary person, glancing toward it, the newspaper meant nothing; to Josie's practised eye it was plainly a shield. Being short of stature, the girl had to drag in a chair in order to reach the high shelf. She removed the newspaper, took down a black hand-satchel--it was dreadfully heavy and she almost dropped it--and then replaced the paper as it had been before.

Josie was jubilant. She removed the chair, again closed the closet door, and leaving the room practically as she had found it stole back to her own apartment, the heavy satchel concealed in the folds of her frock. But no one saw her, the hall being vacant, and she breathed a sigh of relief as she locked her own door against possible intruders.

Then she placed the black satchel on a stand and bent over it. The lock was an unusual one. She tried all the slender keys upon her bunch without effect--they were either too large or did not fit the keyhole. Next she took a thin hairpin, bent and twisted it this way and that and tried to pry the lock open. Failure. However, she was beginning to understand the mechanism of the lock by this time. From that all-containing handbag which was her inseparable companion she drew out a file, and taking one of the master-keys, began to file it to fit the lock of the black satchel.

This operation consumed more time than she was aware, so interesting was the intricate work. She was presently startled by a sound in the corridor. Mr. Kauffman was coming back to his room, whistling an aria from "Die Walkure." Josie paused, motionless; her heart almost stopped beating.

The man unlocked his door and entered, still whistling. Sometimes the whistle was soft and low, again it was louder and more cheerful. Josie listened in suspense. As long as the whistling continued she realized that the theft of the black satchel remained undiscovered.

Kauffman remained in his room but a few moments. When he departed, carefully locking his door after him, he was still whistling. Josie ran to her own door and when he had passed it opened it just a crack, to enable her to gaze after him. Underneath his arm he carried a bundle of the sample suspenders.

"Good!" she whispered softly, retreating to bend over the satchel again. "Mr. Abe Kauffman will sell suspenders this morning as a blind to his more important industries, so I needn't hurry."

Sooner than she expected the lock clicked and sprang open. Her eyes at first fell upon some crumpled, soiled shirts, but these she hurriedly removed. The remainder of the satchel contained something enclosed in a green flannel bag. It was heavy, as she found when she tried to lift it out, and a sudden suspicion led her to handle the thing very gingerly. She put it on the table beside the satchel and cautiously untied the drawstring at the mouth of the bag. A moment later she had uncovered a round ball of polished blue steel, to which was attached a tube covered with woven white cotton.

Josie fell back on a chair, fairly gasping, and stared with big eyes at the ball. In her desire to investigate the possessions of the suspender salesman she had scarcely expected to find anything like this. The most she had hoped to discover were incriminating papers.

"It's a bomb!" she stammered, regarding the thing fearfully; "a real, honest-for-true bomb. And it is meant to carry death and destruction to loyal supporters of our government. There's no doubt of that. But--" The thoughts that followed so amazing an assertion were too bewildering to be readily classified. They involved a long string of conjectures, implicating in their wide ramifications several persons of important standing in the community. The mere suggestion of what she had uncovered sufficed to fill Josie's heart and brain with terror.

"Here! I mustn't try to think it out just yet," she told herself, trying with a little shiver of repulsion for the thing to collect her wits. "One idea at a time, Josie, my girl, or you'll go nutty and spoil everything! Now, here's a bomb--a live, death-dealing bomb--and that's the first and only thing to be considered at present."

Controlling her aversion and fear, the girl turned the bomb over and over, giving it a thorough examination. She had never seen such a thing before, but they had often been explained to her and she had an inkling as to the general method of

their construction. This one before her was of beautiful workmanship, its surface as carefully turned and polished as if it had been intended for public exhibition. Grooves had been cut in the outer surface and within these grooves lay the coils of the time fuse, which was marked with black ink into regular sections. The first section from the end of the fuse was marked "6;" the next section "5" and so on down to the section nearest the bomb, which was divided by the marks "1"--"1/2"--"1/4."

"I see," said Josie, nodding her head with intelligent perception. "Each section, when lighted, will burn for one hour, running along its groove but harmless until the end of the fuse is reached. If the entire fuse is lighted, it will require just six hours to explode the bomb, while if it is cut off to the last mark and then lighted, the bomb will explode in fifteen minutes. The operator can set it to suit himself, as circumstances require."

The manner in which the fuse was attached to the bomb was simple. The hole made in the bomb was exactly the size of the fuse inserted into it. There were two little knobs, one on each side the hole. After pushing the fuse into the hole a fine wire was wound around it and attached to the tiny knobs, thus holding it firmly in place.

Josie took a pair of small pincers, unwound the wire and cautiously withdrew the fuse from the hole. Examining the end of the fuse she saw it was filled with a powdery substance which, when ignited, would explode the bomb. She had recourse to her hairpin again and carefully picked the powder out of the fuse for the distance of the entire first section. This proved difficult and painstaking work, but when completed not a grain of the powder remained in the woven cotton casing for the distance of six inches from the end.

Having accomplished that much, Josie sat looking at the thing in a speculative way. She could not have told you, at the moment, why her first act had been to render the bomb impotent in so queer a manner when she could have simply destroyed the entire fuse. But, of course, no one would try to use the fiendish contrivance unless it was supplied with a fuse.

After a period of thought the girl decided what to do next. She removed the bomb, fuse, green bag--even the satchel--to the big lower drawer of her bureau, and turned the lock.

"No one is likely to come in but the chambermaid, and she will be too busy to disturb anything," Josie decided; and then she locked her room door and went down stairs to breakfast.