



DRESSING-UP

A STORY

BY W. R. BURNETT

WHEN the store manager saw Blue and his girl, Birdy, coming in the front door, he turned to Al, one of the clerks, and said:

"Look at this, Al. The stockyards're moving down town."

Al laughed, then he put on his best professional manner, clasped his hands in front of his stomach, inclined his head slightly, and walked up to Blue.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

Blue was short and stocky. His legs were thin, his waist small, but his shoulders were wide enough for a man six feet tall. His face was red and beefy, and his cheekbones were so prominent that they stuck out of his face. He looked up at Al.

"I'm buying an outfit, see," he said. "I'm gonna shed these rags and climb into something slick."

"Yes, sir," said Al. "How about one of our new spring models?"

"He wants a gray suit," said Birdy, adjusting her new fur neckpiece.

"Double-breasted," said Blue.

"Yes, sir," said Al.

"But first I want some silk underwear," said Blue. "I'm dressing from the hide out."

The store manager came over and smiled.

"Take good care of this young man, won't you, Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes, sir," said Al.

"Warm, isn't it?" the store manager said to Birdy.

"Yeah, ain't it?" said Birdy, taking off her neckpiece and dangling it over her

arm like the women in the advertisements.

The store manager walked to the back of the shop and talked to the cashier:

"There's a boy that's got a big hunk of money all of a sudden," he said, "and he's gonna lose it the same way."

"Yeah?" said the cashier. "Well, I wish my rich uncle that I haven't got would die. Take a look at that neck-piece his girl's wearing. He didn't get that for five dollars."

Al spread out the silk underwear on the counter, and Blue looked through it. Birdy held up a lavender shirt.

"Here you are, Blue. Here's what you ought to get."

"Say . . . !" said Blue.

"Yes, sir," said Al; "we're selling lots of that. Just had an order for a dozen suits from Mr. Hilschmann out in Lake Forest."

"That's where the swells come from," said Birdy.

Blue looked at the lavender shirt and the lavender shorts and said:

"All right. I'll take a dozen."

Al glanced up from his order book, caught the manager's eye, and winked. The manager came up to Blue, put his hand on his shoulder and said:

"My dear sir, since you seem to know real stuff when you see it, I'll let you in on something. We got a new shipment of cravats that we have only just begun to unpack. But if you'd like to look at them, I'll send down to the stockroom for them."

"Sure," said Blue.

"Thanks awfully," said Birdy.

"It's our very best stock. Handmade cravats of the best material obtainable."

"We want the best, don't we, Blue?" said Birdy.

"Sure," said Blue.

While the manager sent for the cravats, Blue bought a dozen silk shirts, some collars, a solid gold collar pin, some onyx cuff links, a set of military brushes, and two dozen pairs of socks. Al bent over his order book and wrote in the items swiftly, computing the possible amount of this windfall. In a few minutes a stock boy brought up the neckties and stood with his mouth open while Blue selected a dozen of the most expensive ties. The manager noticed him.

"Just leave the rest of the stock, please," he said, then he turned his back to Blue and hissed, "Get out of here!"

The stock boy went back to the basement, and the manager turned back to Blue, smiling.

"Those cravats retail at four dollars apiece," he said, "but because you're giving us such a nice order, I'll let you have them for three fifty."

"O.K.," said Blue.

"Them sure are swell ties, Blue," said Birdy, putting her arm through his. "Won't we be lit up though?"

"Sure," said Blue.

When the accessories had been selected, Blue began to try on the suits Al brought him. Blue strode up and down in front of the big triple mirror, puffed out his chest, struck attitudes, and studied his profile, which he had never seen before except in one Bertillon picture. Al stayed at his elbow, offering suggestions, helping him with the set of a coat, telling him how wonderful he looked; and the manager stayed in the background, occasionally making a remark to Birdy whom he addressed as "Madam."

Blue, after a long consultation with Birdy, selected two of the most expensive suits: a blue serge single-breasted and a gray double-breasted. Then he bought a gray felt hat at twelve dollars,

a small sailor at eight, and a panama at eighteen.

"Well," said Blue, "I guess you guys got about as much of my jack as you're gonna get."

"How about shoes?" Al put in.

"By God, I forgot," said Blue.

"Hey, Birdy, I forgot shoes. Ain't that good? Look at this suitcase!"

He held up his foot. He was wearing big tan brogans, and there was a hole in the sole which went clear through the sock to the skin.

"Put your foot down, Blue," said Birdy. "Where you think you're at?"

Blue bought a pair of tan oxfords, a pair of black oxfords, and a pair of white and tan sport shoes.

"Now we're done," said Blue. "I guess I ought to look pretty Boul' Mich' now."

Al totaled up the bill. Birdy and the manager had a long conversation about the weather; and Blue stood before the triple mirror studying his profile.

Al hesitated before he told Blue the amount of the bill. He called for the manager to O.K. it, then he said:

"Cash or charge, sir?"

Blue took out his billfold which was stuffed with big bills.

"Cash," he said, "how much?"

"Four hundred and sixty-five dollars," said Al.

Blue gave him five one-hundred-dollar bills.

"Now," said Blue, "I want you to get that gray suit fixed up right away so's I can put it on. I'm gonna dress from the hide out, and you guys can throw my old duds in the sewer."

"Yes, sir," said Al. "I'll get our tailor right away. We got a dressing-room on the second floor."

The cashier rang up the sale and gave the change to the manager.

"Are you going away for the summer?" asked the manager as he handed Blue his change.

"Yeah," said Blue; "me and the girl friend are gonna see New York. It'll be our first trip."

"That'll be nice," said the manager. "Are you in business for yourself?"

Blue glanced at Birdy, and she shook her head slightly.

"I'm in the oil business," said Blue. "I got some wells. I'm from Oklahoma."

"That's interesting," said the manager.

When they were leaving the café Blue took out his billfold and gave the doorman a five-dollar bill. The doorman's eyes popped but he managed to bow and smile.

"Yes, sir, yes, sir," he said. "Do you want a cab?"

"Yeah," said Blue, hanging on to Birdy who was drunker than he was.

"Yeah, you're damn right we want a cab," said Birdy. "Do we look like the kind of people that walk?"

"That's right," said Blue.

"Yes, sir," said the doorman, and he went out into the middle of the street and blew his whistle.

Before the taxi came a small sedan drew up at the curb across the street, and two men got out.

"There he is," said one of them, pointing at Blue.

"Hello, Guido," shouted Blue. "Look at me. Ain't I Boul' Mich'?"

Guido ran across the street, took Blue by the arm, shook him several times and said:

"You got to sober up, keed! Get it! You got to sober up. Somebody spilled something, see? Me and Bud's taking it on the lam. Saint Louie won't look bad to us."

"Yellow," said Blue.

"Sure," said Guido; "but I got a stake and I'm gonna spend some of it before I get bumped. Somebody wised Mike's boys up. They're looking for Pascal right now."

"What the hell!" said Blue, laughing. "Look at me, Guido. Ain't I Boul' Mich'? I got silk underwear under this suit. Look at Birdy."

"Look at me," said Birdy; "ain't I Boul' Mich'?"

"Say," said Guido, "you better ditch that tommy and put in with us. We got room in the heap."

"Not me," said Blue. "I ain't scairt of Mike Bova. I'll bump him next."

"All right," said Guido; "you'll have a swell funeral."

"Guido," called the other man, "let that bum go."

"So long, Blue," said Guido.

"So long," said Blue.

"Bye, bye, Guido," said Birdy.

Guido crossed the street, got into the driver's seat, slammed the door, and the sedan moved off. The taxi was waiting, and the doorman helped Birdy and Blue into it.

"Good-night, sir," said the doorman.

Birdy was lying on the lounge flat on her back with her hands under her head and an empty drinking glass sitting upright on her stomach. Blue, in his shirtsleeves, his collar wilted and his tie untied, was sitting at the table reading a crumpled newspaper. There were three-inch headlines.

BOVA'S LIEUTENANT KILLED
SHOT DOWN AS HE LEFT
HIS OFFICE BY GUNMEN

"You hear me!" said Blue. "Funnest thing ever pulled. There I was waiting in a room across the street trying to read a magazine, and Pascal was sitting with his head against the wall sleeping. 'Christ, I says, 'there's Pete now.' He was coming out of his office. We wasn't looking for him for two hours yet. So I jist set there. Hell, I couldn't move, see, 'cause he come sudden, see, and I was figuring he wouldn't be out for two hours yet. 'Pascal, I says, 'there's Pete now.' But Pascal he jist opens his eyes like a fish and don't say nothing. Pete he stops and looks right up at the window where I'm sitting, see, and I wonder does this guy know something. Hell, I couldn't move. I wasn't ready, see? Well, so Pascal he slips and falls over and hits his head. This makes me laugh but still I couldn't move my

trigger finger. Pete he holds out his hand like he's looking for rain, then I let him have it. I don't know. It was funny. I jist let him have it without knowing it, see, and before, I couldn't pull that trigger when I wanted to. When the old Thompson starts to bark, Pascal gets up and yells, 'What you smoking for, you bum? It ain't time yet.' Then he looks out the window and there's Pete on the sidewalk dead as yesterday's newspaper and an old woman is pointing up at us. We ditch the gun and beat it down the back stairs. That's all there was to it. There wasn't nobody in the alley, see, so we jist walked along slow, and pretty soon we come to a drug-store and went in to get some cigs 'cause we smoked all ours waiting for that guy to come out."

"Pour me a little drink, honey," said Birdy.

Blue got up, took a big flask out of his hip pocket, and poured Birdy another drink. Then he sat down, took out his billfold and extracted a couple of railroad tickets.

"Look at them, old kid," he said. "When we ride, we ride. Twentieth Century to New York. That's us, kid; and won't we give 'em a treat over in Brooklyn! Say, them Easterners think we're still shooting Indians. Hell, Chi makes that place look like a Y. M. C. A. Yeah, I used to know Ruby Welch, and he was big stuff from Brooklyn; but what did he do when Guido started gunning for him? He got himself put in the can as a vag. Yeah, we ought to go big over in New York, kid. What they need over there is guts. We can give 'em that, kid. When somebody needs somebody for the No. 1 caper, Blue's the guy for the job. I was born with a rod in my cradle and I'm the best there is. Yeah, when the Big Boy wanted Pete bumped who did he call on first? Old Blue, yes, sir, old Blue."

Blue got up, turned on the gramophone, and started to dance with a chair.

"Hey," he said, "come on, let's dance, Birdy. We're big shots now, Birdy;

let's dance. Look at me! If I had my coat on I'd look like the Prince of Wales. Boul' Mich', kid; that's us; Boul' Mich'. We'll knock their eyes out on Fifth Avenue, kid; yes, sir. Let's dance."

"I'm getting sick," said Birdy.

Blue went over and looked down at her. Her face was pale and drawn; there were blue circles under her eyes.

"Getting sick, Birdy?"

"Yeah. I can't stand it like I used to when I was with The Madam. Put me to bed, honey."

Blue picked Birdy up and carried her into the bedroom. Birdy began to hiccup.

"Gimme glass of water," she said.

"You don't want water," Blue said; "you want a nice big slug."

"No, gimme glass of water."

She lay down on the bed and, before Blue could bring her a glass of water, she was asleep. He stood looking down at her, then he went back into the living room, took a long pull at his flask, and picked up the crumpled newspaper. But he had read the account of the killing of Big Pete so many times that he knew it by heart. He sat staring at the paper, then he threw it on the floor and sat rolling a cigarette between his palms.

It had begun to get light. He heard a milk wagon passing the house. He got up and went over to the window. The houses were still dark, and far off down the street a string of lighted elevated cars ran along the horizon, but the sky was gray and in the east some of the clouds were turning yellow. It was quiet. Blue began to notice how quiet it was.

"Birdy," he called.

But he heard her snoring, and turned back to the table.

The telephone rang, but when he answered it there was nobody on the line.

"What's the idea?" he said.

He sat down at the table, took out his billfold and counted his money, then he took out the railroad tickets and read

everything printed on them. Again he noticed how quiet it was. He got up, put away his billfold, and went into the bedroom. Birdy was sleeping with her mouth open, flat on her back, with her arms spread out. Blue lay down beside her and tried to sleep, but he turned from side to side, and finally gave it up.

"I don't feel like sleeping," he thought. "I'm all het up about going East on The Century. Here I am, old Blue, riding The Century dressed up like John Barrymore and with a swell frail. Yeah, that's me. Boul' Mich' Blue."

He got up, put on his coat, and began to pose in front of the living-room mirror.

"Boul' Mich' Blue," he said.

Finally he sat down at the table and laid out a game of solitaire; but he had so many bad breaks with the cards that he began to cheat and then lost interest in the game.

"I know," he said, "what I need is food."

He got up and went to the refrigerator, but there wasn't anything in it except a few pieces of cold meat.

"Hell!" he said, "I guess I'll have to go down to Charley's."

He put on his new soft hat, but hesitated. If they was looking for Pascal, they was looking for him, too. Right now there wasn't nobody on the streets and it was a good time to bump a guy.

"Hell!" he said, buttoning his coat, "I got a streak of luck. It'll hold. Boul' Mich' Blue'll be on The Century to-morrow. Yeah bo! I ain't scairt of no Mike Bova."

When Blue came out of the apartment house the sun was just coming up. The alleys and areaways were still dark, but there was a pale yellow radiance in the streets. There was no one about; no sign of life. Not even a parked car.

"Hell!" said Blue; "safe as a tank-town."

A window across the street was raised, and Blue ducked without meaning to; but a fat woman put her head out of the window and stared into the street.

There was nobody in Charley's, not even a waiter. Behind the counter the big nickel coffee urns were sending up steam. Blue took out a fifty-cent piece and flung it on the counter. Wing, the counterman, looked in from the kitchen.

"Come on, Wing," said Blue, "snap it up."

"Didn't know you, kid," said Wing. "Ain't you dressed up, though? Must've struck it."

"I sure did," said Blue. "Give me a combination and some muddy water."

"Muddy water, hell," said Wing. "I jist made that Java."

Blue leaned on the counter and stared at himself in the mirror, while Wing went back to make his sandwich.

"Hey, Wing," Blue shouted, "did you know I was going East on The Century?"

"Are, hunh?" Wing shouted back. "You're on the big time now, ain't you, kid?"

"That's the word," said Blue.

Blue turned to look out into the street. He saw a man passing, and stared at him. The man was small and had a slouch hat pulled down over his face. Blue thought he recognized him and slid his gun out of the holster under his armpit and put it in his coat pocket. The man passed without looking in.

"I got the jumps," said Blue. "It's that rotten gin."

Wing came in with the sandwich, drew Blue a cup of coffee, then leaned his elbows on the counter and watched Blue eat.

"Well," said Wing, "I see where they got Big Pete."

"Yeah," said Blue.

"I knew they was gonna," said Wing. "I got inside dope."

"Yeah?" said Blue.

"It was coming to him."

"Yeah."

Blue finished his sandwich, lighted a cigarette, and sipped his coffee. It was broad daylight now, and trucks had begun to pass the restaurant.

"Going East, are you, kid?" said Wing.

"Yeah," said Blue. "I got in on a big cut and I don't have to worry none for some time. I jist took my dame down and dressed her up this afternoon. Is she hot? Me, I got silk underwear on."

He unbuttoned his shirt and showed Wing his lavender underwear.

"You're sure a dressed-up boy," said Wing. "I bet you paid ten bucks for that hat you got on."

"Twelve," said Blue. "It was the best they had. I paid eighteen for a panama. You like this suit?"

"It's red hot," said Wing; then with a twinge of envy, "If I wasn't going straight maybe I could wear rags like that."

"How long's your parole got to run yet?"

"Plenty long. And I got the dicks down on me. They thought I'd stool for 'em in this ward. But that ain't my way."

"Why don't you make a break for Canada?"

"Yeah," said Wing, "and get jerked back to stir."

Blue finished his coffee, paid his check, and gave Wing a dollar bill. Wing turned the bill over and over.

"Say," he said, "give me another buck and I'll put you on to something hot at Arlington."

Blue laughed and tossed Wing a silver dollar.

"Never mind the tip," he said. "I know lots of better ways to lose my dough. Why don't you lay off the ponies, Wing? You can't beat that racket."

"I got the itch," said Wing.

Blue looked into the mirror and adjusted his hat to the proper angle.

"Well," he said, "I'm leaving you. I'll send you a postcard from the Big Burg, Wing."

But Blue noticed that Wing had begun to get nervous; his face was twitching.

"Blue," said Wing, "for Christ's sake watch your step. I'm telling you

straight, kid. One of Mike's boys was in here buzzing me about you jist 'fore she began to get light. I'm telling you straight, kid. It ain't my fight and I wasn't gonna peep. But you're a right guy, Blue."

Blue rubbed his hand over his face, then he said:

"It was The Wolf. I seen him go past."

"Yeah," said Wing.

"Jesus!" said Blue, "which way'd I better go?"

"I'd put you upstairs . . ." Wing began.

"No use," said Blue. "The Wolf seen me."

Wing drew himself a cup of coffee and drank it at a gulp.

"If they knew I'd peeped they'd bump me sure," said Wing.

Blue stood staring at the counter, then he pulled his hat down over his eyes, and slipped his right hand into the pocket where the gun was.

"Well," he said, "the alley's no good. It's blind my way. The side street won't get me no place. So all I got's the front way. Hell!" he went on, puffing out his chest, "I got a streak of luck, Wing. It'll hold."

Wing drew himself another cup of coffee.

"Here's hoping," he said.

Blue went to the door and, putting his head out a little way, looked up and down. The street was deserted except for a truck which was coming toward him slowly. It was a Standard Oil truck.

"Wing," he said, "has any of Mike's boys got a hide-out anywhere around here?"

"Don't know of none."

"Well," said Blue, "here I go."

"So long," said Wing.

Blue stepped out of the restaurant, threw his shoulders back, and began to walk slowly toward Birdy's apartment. The Standard Oil truck passed him and went on. The street was quiet. At the end of the street he saw an elevated on its way toward the Loop.

"I wish I was on that baby," he said.

But the nearer he got to the apartment the surer he became that his luck would hold. Hell! it was the first break he'd had since he and Guido hijacked that big Detroit shipment. He had tickets on The Century. When a guy has tickets on The Century he uses them. And that wasn't all. He was a big shot now; the Big Boy had promised him a bonus; he had on silk underwear.

"Hell!" said Blue, "it ain't in the cards."

Across from Birdy's apartment he saw the same fat woman leaning out of the window. When he looked up she drew her head in hastily. Blue made a dash for the door, but across the street a Thompson gun began to spit. Blue stumbled, dropped his gun, and ran blindly out into the middle of the street; then he turned and ran blindly back toward the house. An iron fence caught him just below the belt and he doubled over it. Across the street a window was slammed.