

FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

SEPTEMBER 1963
Volume 12 Number 9

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

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SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All subscription correspondence should be addressed to FANTASTIC, Circulation Department, 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Please allow at least six weeks for change of address. Include your old address, as well as new—enclosing if possible an address label from a recent issue.

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VANITY, THY NAME IS

By RON GOULART

Plumrose, detective of the occult, faces a question of ghostly thefts, jealous poltergeists and disappearing boxers. All most confusing, especially to young Willsey, still unreturned to 1961, who does all the work.

I WAS trying to decide whether I should stay in 1897 and so I wasn't paying much attention to the fight. Edwin Plumrose jumped up from the chair next to me and said, "Ferguson is going to take him."

"So soon?" I asked. "It's only the 27th round."

Plumrose glanced quickly at me, his white moustache and beard flickering brightly in the torchlit old barn. "My Cousin Nathan once watched a flock of blue-winged warblers for three solid weeks in the interest of science. Here you have an opportunity to see Walloping Ferguson destroy Kid McDermott with scientific footwork that rivals, and in some ways outdoes, that of Corbett and you sit and sulk."

"It's just," I said, "that I keep thinking you could be home fixing the time machine."

"Go to it, Ferguson," Plumrose shouted.

There were some three hundred other sports fans in the old barn and they were shouting, too. I was trying to come to an ethical decision and all this noise was distracting. "In 1961, where I should be," I said, "I could see two fights and a dozen commercials in this time."

The 27th round ended and Plumrose said to me, "When I suggested coming to this clandestine boxing exhibition you were agreeable, Willsey. You implied you might seriously be thinking of staying on as my house guest and assistant. Giving up your notions of 1961. An uncle of mine once spent two and a half years in Oslo, Norway, although he had originally stepped off the train only to buy a souvenir."

I nodded. "I like 1897 and all. I think maybe I should go home to my right time, though. That time ray of yours snatched me here sort of unexpectedly."

"If you hadn't come you wouldn't have been able to save Emily Southwell from the attentions of the Nob Hill Fiend," said Plumrose, "Besides."

The bell sounded for a new round. "Besides what?"

"You love Emily Southwell," Plumrose shouted, his eyes again on the ring. "Don't you?"

"I guess I do," I shouted back. "But I feel odd loving somebody who was born in the nineteenth century."

"Love knows no boundaries," said Plumrose, rocking happily as the fight went on.

I SHRUGGED and tried to pay attention to the boxers. The time ray had accidentally been broken when I hit the Nob Hill Fiend over the head with it to prevent him from attacking Emily with an assortment of surgical tools. Since I'd gotten to know Emily I wasn't that anxious to go back to 1961.

"The footworks reminds me of my Uncle Leon," Plumrose said.

"He was a boxer?"

"No, he just had nice feet."

Walloping Ferguson was a wide shouldered heavyweight and had a dapper half-smiling way of fighting. Kid McDermott

was heavier and speckled all over with orange freckles. His long orange trunks matched his straight standing hair. Ferguson had knocked the Kid down several times and seemed about to do it again.

I hunched to one side to get a better angle of viewing. Glancing toward Ferguson's corner I noticed a tall young man standing beside Ferguson's handlers. The guy had a thick chestnut moustache and was wearing a suit like mine with the same very high and uncomfortable stiff shirt collar. At least it was, being my first 1897 outfit, uncomfortable for me. The man was smiling and laughing with the Walloping Ferguson crew.

Kid McDermott was slowing, puffing hard. He sparkled with sweat in the torchlight. Walloping Ferguson got a nice left jab in under the Kid's faltering guard and was in the act of following it with a right to the chin. And then Walloping Ferguson wasn't there anymore.

He had blurred for a part of a second and then suddenly vanished completely. The sudden silence of the crowd seemed to expand and push against the shadowy walls of the big barn. There was no movement, no sound at all. The man with the chestnut moustache ducked under the ropes and ran for the center of the ring.

All at once the silence broke and movement started, as though off somewhere someone had just kissed the sleeping beauty. The fans jumped, shouted, pushed ahead, tangling and fighting.

"Supernormal," said Plumrose and grabbed my arm.

"Rigged. Rigged for sure," yelled two seamen as they fought by us.

WE were working against the crowd, angling for one of the small side doors. We finally elbowed and kneed free out into the night. We had, however, come out on the edge of a steep grassy incline and as more of the crowd found their way out Plumrose and I went bumbling down hill.

We lost momentum midway and stopped in a clump of brush, spreadeagled a few feet apart.

"Magic?" I asked, helping Plumrose up once I'd righted myself.

"What?" he asked. "The strange disappearance of Walloping Ferguson? I have a feeling no. Unfortunately he was very near to putting Kid McDermott away for good. Such excellent footwork."

"Odd way to fix a fight," I said as we made our way down. "Don't you want to investigate?"

"Later someone may want to pay me to do it," said Plumrose, brushing grass and burrs from

his dark coat sleeves. "And later there'll be less chance of being trampled. My Cousin Pawnee once had an unfortunate experience with a group of longhorns."

"Wait now," called a tenor voice behind us. "Halt if you please."

We had both reached the street and we turned to look up the slope. "It's Inspector Rafferty McAfferty," I said. "Pride of the San Francisco police force."

"Arresting us for attending an illegal fight?" asked Plumrose.

"No, no," said McAfferty. He tipped his derby and his spongey red moustache bobbed with excitement. "It is far more serious business that brings me here after you." He caught his breath. "Stopping by your house to consult you I learned from your good housekeeper, Mrs. Hoggins, that you two buckos had come along here. I was about to enter when I saw you and all those other lads come exploding out. Would there be trouble?"

"In a way," said Plumrose and told the inspector what had happened.

"This is a strange city, this San Francisco," said McAfferty. "Strange things are apt to go on. Some of my men were attending the fight tonight and they can look into the problem of Ferguson. I have my own problems."

Plumrose cocked his head, frowning. "I believe there's a

saloon a block or so from here. Can you tell us your troubles there, Rafferty?"

"That I can," said Rafferty McAfferty, his tenor voice quavering.

WHEN we had all seated ourselves at a round wood table in the small stove-heated saloon and tried our beers the inspector said, "It is a ghost burglar I've come to grief over, Edwin."

"Ghost burglar?" Plumrose smiled, relaxing back in his chair.

"You know," said McAfferty, "that although I have consulted you often, Edwin, I have never consulted you unless I was face to face with the unknown. That is so, isn't it?" He inhaled, drank some of his beer. "The first few times this burglar struck I didn't fright. Often, as you know, witnesses give imaginative accounts of what they've really seen. So even though the witnesses in this case are from among the finest San Francisco families I tended not to give too much credit to their stories."

"The details?" asked Plumrose.

"Houses," said McAfferty. "Fine mansions and splendid homes. This thing gets inside, through locked doors and windows, past servants and retainers. It makes off with paintings, jewels, money, stocks and bonds,

fine old silver and heirlooms and other items of value."

"What is it the witnesses say?"

"Those who have seen anything," said McAfferty, "say they saw their valuable possessions go floating down the corridors and hallways and go drifting away on the night wind."

Plumrose smiled at me. "Wonderful," he said. "But what made you come to me now, Rafferty? Do you believe in this phantom thief now?"

The inspector closed his eyes. "Edwin," he said, "not three hours ago I saw the thing myself." His eyes came open, wide and round. His moustache drooped. "I could not bring myself to follow the thing. Panic and fear seized hold of me and I let that ghostly bucko make off with Tuveson Candler's best silver service." He shivered. "It was the spectacle of all those spoons and forks dancing across the twilight lawn that curtailed my bravery. I have to admit it. I turn to you for help, Edwin."

Plumrose sipped his beer, then said, "How did you come to be at Tuveson Candler's?"

"Candler had asked me to stop by in relation to another matter. Some young bucko who was angry at Candler for denying him membership in the Romany Club. A minor thing," said McAfferty, "but when San Francisco's second wealthiest man has a minor

complaint, well then, an inspector calls. It was while I was in his study that we heard odd sounds and screams from below. I investigated. That was when I saw the ghost burglar carrying the silver out of the dining room." The inspector lowered his head.

"Cheer up," said Plumrose. "My Cousin Harrison once let a small dog chase him seven miles. At any rate, I'll take on the case. Can you provide me with information on all the robberies? I haven't seen any mention of this in the newspapers."

"I've kept it down to next to nothing," said McAfferty. "Ghost rumors can cause panic. Or ridicule." He sighed. "I left my file on this case back at your house with Mrs. Hoggins. You will look into this then?"

"Not only that," said Plumrose. "I'll solve it within three days." He smiled again and finished his beer.

I WAS sitting in one of the bent-wood rockers in Plumrose's study, watching the rain through the half shuttered windows. The overgrown garden was filled with a scattering of statuary and I liked to watch the rain slide down the Venuses and cupids and the elks and satyrs. It was a half hour before breakfast and there was a fire in the fireplace. Plumrose had not come down yet and I wandered over to his desk and

looked at the bent parts of the time ray.

"There's one here already," said Mrs. Hoggins, sliding through the doorway.

I turned. "One what?"

"Client," she said, her hands hidden in her striped apron. "A dissolute looking little man with a large nose. Since you seem to be acting as Mr. Plumrose's assistant you might take him off my hands."

"Sure."

"And," she said, "you might tell Mr. Plumrose that the tarot cards have nothing good to say about him today."

"Anything specific?"

"I dropped the pack while I was taking them out of the box," Mrs. Hoggins said. "That was enough of a sign for me and I went no further."

"I'll tell him."

"Mr. Marcus Mack," she said and left.

A small wiry man with thinning white hair, a clean shaven face and the large round nose of a comedian looked in. "Plumrose, is it?"

"No, I'm his assistant, Bert Willsey." I motioned at one of the rockers. "I can talk to you till he gets down."

Mack sat. "You heard about my boy?"

"No."

"The Walloper. He went up in smoke."

"Wait," I said. "You're Walloping Ferguson's manager?"

"That I am," he said.

"We were at the fight last night. What happened?"

Mack shook his head. "I want to hire you to explain to me. I know Kid McDermott and Cracker Brogan are behind it. Still it's like no jinx or evil eye I know of and I've handled three dozen boys in my time. All good fighters, except Sailor Alch and he went on the stage anyway."

"My Uncle Berkshire once understudied Sailor Alch in a swing through the midwest," said Plumrose, coming into the room. He had on one of his art nouveau dressing gowns, the pockets fat with scrolls and fragments of manuscript and assorted occult objects. "Mr. Mack, Walloping Ferguson has the feet of a true scientist. I'll be glad to help you and bring the matter to solution within three days. Now will you please supply any information you can?"

MARCUS MACK did. All he knew actually was that Ferguson had vanished right in the middle of the ring. No one had made any threats before the fight, no one had contacted him since. Walloping Ferguson was a strong contender for the heavyweight title and maybe some Fitzsimmons fans had put a spell on him. Maybe Kid McDermott's

circle had done it. But it seemed odd that they let him take a beating for twenty-seven rounds before they pulled their trick.

Nothing that had happened the day of the fight seemed to provide a clue. Ferguson had mentioned nothing strange to his manager before or during the fight. Ferguson had, late in the afternoon, complained of a headache and gone over to see Dr. Anthony Hatch. Hatch was a young doctor who had an interest in the ring. Mack had already talked with him and Dr. Hatch said there had been nothing wrong with Ferguson.

Plumrose nodded and smiled throughout Mack's account. "Three days, Mack, and I'll have Walloping Ferguson back to you. The fee is one hundred dollars. I'd like to solve this for nothing, being an admirer of yours, but I'm already doing a feeless case for the police department."

"A hundred is no problem," said Mack, taking a bill from his wallet. "You come highly recommended by all the sports writers in town I trust." He handed Plumrose the money. "Shall I do anything?"

"You don't have to do anything," said Plumrose.

After Marcus Mack had driven off in the rain I said, "I guess the time machine gets put off three days now."

Plumrose grinned and put the

hundred dollars in a pocket of the dressing gown. "This afternoon, sometime after three, we'll visit the barn where last night's contest took place. Now I want to read over the reports on the phantom burglar. Why don't you go see Emily?"

"Don't solve anything without me," I said.

The rain was stopping and I made it to Emily's by streetcar without getting wet or lost.

BASCOM, the Southwell butler, showed me into a parlor and I stood watching some cloth flowers under a bell glass until Emily came in.

"Bert," she said.

I smiled at her. "Hello, Emily." She was a slender girl with auburn hair. The blouse and long dark skirt she was wearing did not seem as different as they had when I first met her. I was thinking of her as more and more of a contemporary. That doesn't quite say it. What I mean is I was feeling more relaxed about being in love with a girl from 1897.

"I was going to write you," she said, taking my hand. "In fact, I had only this moment decided on the kind of stationery."

That was fine. In 1961 girls in the same city with me seldom wrote me letters. "Do you want to tell me or do you still feel like writing it instead?"

She said, "I can tell you. Clas-

rissa Steepleton has poltergeists."

I let go of her. "You were going to write me about an occult case?"

"Yes," she said. "Poltergeists shouldn't be too hard to get rid of. I thought if you could handle it alone you would be able to prove to Mr. Plumrose that you are worth your hire."

"Plumrose has to keep me on. It's his fault I'm stranded here."

"Don't you want to be here, in my time?"

"Yes," I said. "But I don't have to prove anything to Plumrose."

"Occult detective work pays well," said Emily, turning away. "People could well afford to get married on an occult detective's salary."

Taking hold of her shoulders I said, "Okay, I'll fix the poltergeists."

"That's splendid," Emily said, apparently confident.

"What are they?"

"Why, noisy spirits, of course. Prankish ghosts who knock things about and raise mischief unseen."

"And Clarissa Steepleton is bothered by them."

"For the past several weeks. At such an inopportune time."

"Why?"

Emily moved to a square ball-footed table and picked up a cardboard backed photo. "This is Clarissa and her fiancé."

THE girl was a frail blonde with large bright eyes and a high forehead. She was pretty and mean looking. The guy standing stiffly next to her chair was in his late thirties, wide and dark with slick middle-parted hair and a large black moustache. I think the thing that bothered me most about 1897 was the prevalence of moustaches. "Who's the man?"

"Tuveson Candler," said Emily. "Some say he's the . . ."

"... second richest man in San Francisco."

"You know him?"

"No," I said. "Inspector McAfferty mentioned him to Plumrose and me." I tapped the picture with my thumb. "I assume Clarissa, too, is wealthy."

"Her father is Theodore Steepleton, the shady railroad man," said Emily. "He's affable enough for a monopolist, I suppose. They hint that he's *the* richest man in San Francisco."

"Fine. Has anything been stolen from her home lately? Anything turn up missing?"

"No. Poltergeists usually don't steal."

"Tell me what Clarissa told you about these things."

Emily went to the window. The rain had ended and the wide lawns outside glistened as the sun hit them. "Every now and then something falls over. Once a vase was thrown."

"Thrown at who?" I asked.

"At Tuveson. I believe it was while he and Clarissa were playing duets in the music conservatory."

"Has she seen things floating around in the air?"

"Only the vase."

I sat down on a flowered love seat. "I'd like to talk to Clarissa."

"We'll see her at the Merrihugh's ball this evening," said Emily, crossing to me and sitting beside me.

"Big Jim Merrihugh, the grain tycoon. That's right. We are supposed to go there."

"What's a tycoon?"

"Something like a monopolist."

"I hope," said Emily, "there won't be a scene at this ball."

"What do you mean?"

"A month ago," she said, touching my arm, "before you arrived, I attended a similar affair at the Merrihugh's. I went with . . . with Leo. X. Guthrie, I'm afraid."

Guthrie was the Nob Hill Fiend I had saved her from. "And what happened?"

"A young man who had fallen in love with Clarissa forced his way in, he had not been invited, and said some insulting things to several of the guests. He was asked to leave."

"Know who he was?"

Emily said, "A doctor. Dr.

Anthony Hatch, I believe Clarissa said. She met him by accident when she twisted her ankle on a cable car cable and he . . . ”

“Anthony Hatch,” I said. “Wait now. That’s the same doctor who treated Walloping Ferguson before he vanished.” I got up, pulling Emily with me. “I may have some investigating to do tonight.”

“On the poltergeists?”

“Among other things. Will you wait for me here?”

“Father is going to attend the Merrihugh’s party, too. I can go in our carriage with him and meet you there.”

“Good,” I said. “That’s what we’ll do.” I leaned forward and kissed her.

“Tea is served,” announced Bascom at the doorway.

Emily’s father was a tea tycoon so, despite the hour, we couldn’t turn it down.

PLUMROSE, in a fresh dressing gown, was sitting on his striped love seat, his nose touching the rim of his brandy glass. “Hatch,” he said. “Interesting. According to Inspector McAfferty’s notes Anthony Hatch is the man Tuveson Candler said was annoying him about the Romany Club.”

“That makes too many coincidences,” I said. “Because last night at the fight, when everyone else was stunned, one guy

jumped into the ring. I bet that was Dr. Anthony Hatch, too.”

“The vanishing heavyweight, the phantom burglar and the jealous poltergeist,” said Plumrose. “Could Hatch be the source of the whole business?”

“Walloping Ferguson did go to him right before the fight.”

“It might be possible that young Dr. Hatch has stumbled onto some compound or solution that causes invisibility. Though, lord knows, the solution to the invisibility problem has eluded my own researches.”

“What about the clothes?” I asked. “Ferguson went gloves and trunks and shoes.”

“There could be a drug,” said Plumrose, “that causes the illusion of invisibility or that causes the body to give off a force that effects cloth, fabric, leather. That’s one of the things that has held me back. Who wants to run around in the buff while invisible? But Hatch seems to have solved it.”

“Ferguson could have taken some of the stuff by accident, unless he’s an accomplice. When Hatch saw him vanish he knew what had happened. Probably dragged Ferguson out in the confusion and knocked him out or something.”

“Ferguson has not reappeared. If Hatch is the one behind it he must have him locked up.”

I refilled my brandy glass.

"Since Hatch is getting tossed out of the better places regularly I imagine he's not wealthy. He probably needs money to try and win Clarissa and get into clubs like the Romany. So he steals from the rich."

"The Merrihugh's ball is tonight, isn't it?"

"Yeah. You think he'll try something there?"

"More likely he'll visit the homes of the guests while they're out." Plumrose squinted one eye. "Paint."

"Or a net," I said.

He looked at me. "You're reading my thoughts on how to make an invisible burglar visible."

"That's how they always do it in the movies," I said. "The motion pictures."

"That thing of Edison's, yes."

"Or you could use flour or some kind of powder."

"I'll contact Inspector McAf-ferty and supervise that part of the business," said Plumrose. "I'll get a list of the guests from old Merrihugh and cross off the ones who have already been robbed by the phantom burglar. He should try for one of the remaining names."

"Do I come along with you?"

"No. You go over to Hatch's place and watch him. Look up his address in my directory. Try to get in when he leaves and find some trace of Walloping Fer-

guson or an invisibility compound."

"I'll head out right after dinner."

"I doubt if there'll be dinner," said Plumrose. "Mrs. Hoggins tells me that the trolls have made off with the roast."

"We do a hell of a lot of detection on an empty stomach," I said.

DR. Anthony Hatch had his home and office on Green Street down near North Beach. It was a narrow dull brown two-story building hunched in between two wide dark houses with dismal yards. I was standing across the street under a eucalyptus tree, watching the place. It was night now and there were lights on in Hatch's lower windows. All the shades were drawn.

I stuck a finger in my collar to loosen it some and then ran over to the wreck of a house on the left of Hatch. The house was unlit and silent, its windows dusty, its gingerbread askew. I moved alongside it and into Hatch's backyard. Off in his small weathered stable a horse snorted. Then steps sounded in the house and I dropped down behind a box hedge. Hatch came out of the house and ran to the stable. He was the same man I'd seen jump into the ring when Walloping Ferguson had disappeared.

"No more, no more," he said as

he got the horse hitched to the buggy. In a moment he was driving rapidly away.

I stayed down in the bushes for awhile. The sky was clear tonight and stars were showing up. Finally I moved in closer to the house, listening. There was no sound. Plumrose had loaned me a ring of keys he had collected. The third one I tried unlocked Hatch's back door.

I went into an uncarpeted corridor that was filled with the harsh smell of medicines. I got used to the darkness and started checking around from room to room. The downstairs rooms were empty. Upstairs in a spare bedroom I got an odd sensation. The room looked empty but I had the idea it wasn't. I closed the door behind me and lit a lamp on a shawl covered table.

The metal frame bed had a quilted cover on it and in the cover's center there was a deep depression. "Ferguson?"

A murmuring noise came from the direction of the bed. I went over and gingerly put out my hand. I was touching a big ear. I moved my hand down and felt cloth and a knot. I worked at the invisible knot and got it undone. I pulled at the cloth. It came out of nothingness as though I were pulling it through a hole in a wall. I had a red bandana in my hand.

"Are you some other deranged

medical man?" asked a voice.

"No. Are you Walloping Ferguson?"

"The same."

"I'm Bert Willsey and your manager, Marcus Mack, hired us to find you."

"This has taught me a lesson," said Ferguson's voice. "Could you poke around and get at the ropes that are tying me?"

"Sure," I said. "What's happened exactly."

"Well," said the Walloper, "I came over to the doctor's house here late yesterday. A headache had been bothering me and I wanted to get something to fix me up before my fight. Did you see the fight?"

"We did, yes." I got some ropes untied. When they left contact with Ferguson they became visible.

"I had the Kid good."

"He wouldn't have lasted another round."

"But you see, noticing my hand go away into air it threw me off. Then Dr. Hatch was in there saying to come along with him and I'd be all right. Stunned as I was I went along with him. Outside he hit me from behind and when next I came awake I was tied up here."

"Why was Hatch at the fight? Did he give you something there?"

"He was a great fight fan," said Ferguson. "Though I know

now it was as much to meet the swells who attended as it was to see scientific boxing. As to the drug, I took it myself."

"How?" I asked, getting the last of the ropes.

WELL, the doctor was not here when I arrived yesterday. I have a way with locks and I let myself in, hoping to find a remedy for headaches sitting around. Right there on his desk were two small bottles labeled quite plain. Headache Compound. So I took a couple of pills and drank a glass of water. Two or three hours later I was invisible."

"Hatch was probably out robbing Tuveson Candler while you were here."

"Mr. Candler's a great admirer of my boxing." The bed creaked and Ferguson sat up. "When I saw Dr. Hatch at ring-side I told him his headache remedy had done wonderful things for me. He looked at me strange. From then on he kept a watch on me."

"He has the invisibility drug and its antidote out in the open in innocent looking bottles," I said. "He didn't count a patient breaking in."

"I did it because he was such a sporting enthusiast," said Ferguson.

"Do you know what he was going to do with you?"

"Do me in, I'm afraid. We had a chat or two in the day I've been here. Dr. Hatch has had dreams of rising in this town and being the equal of Tuveson Candler. Well, to do that you need money and his practice couldn't bring him that. He told me he had made up this invisible stuff a year ago. He never dared use it until they started snubbing him so soundly." Ferguson laughed. "It takes a good two or three hours to take effect, as I found out. The doctor says it makes the clothes you're wearing invisible, too, if you make sure there's no metal involved. Metal and glass and the like he can't fade out. Quite a handicap for a thief he told me. That's why he lets them think he's a ghost."

"Did he say who he was going to rob tonight?"

"Damn," said Ferguson, apparently standing up. "It's not to be a robbery tonight. He's learned that Miss Clarissa Steepleton is to announce her engagement to Tuveson Candler tonight and he's going to do them some harm. Being rescued has addled my mind I'm afraid."

"You should be able to find the antidote downstairs," I said. "It's probably in that second bottle."

"That it is, according to Hatch."

"I'll get over to the Merrighugh's ball. See you later."

"I hope you do," called Ferguson as I ran out of the place.

THE Merrihugh mansion was all weeping willows and fluted columns. The high bright French windows showed a crowd of waltzers as I jumped out of my hired cab and ran along a gravelled driveway to the main doorway. The butler didn't want to let me in, since I wasn't in formal dress, but I convinced him I was a special messenger of Inspector Rafferty McAfferty and that I had to speak with Miss Steepleton at once.

I spotted a girl who must be Clarissa Steepleton standing with a fat white moustached man. I circled the room, cut in front of the string orchestra and caught her arm. "Miss Steepleton?"

"Lord, Clarissa," said the man with her. "Another of your ill mannered ex-suitors?"

"I'm Bert Willsey, Emily Southwell's friend," I explained.

"Yes?" said Clarissa.

"I think Anthony Hatch is here tonight. He's going to try to hurt you and Tuveson Candler."

"I've made sure Hatch will be turned away," said the man. "I'm Theodore Steepleton." He didn't offer to shake hands.

"That's fine," I said, "except that Hatch may be invisible by now." I looked around the room. "Where's Tuveson Candler?"

"He and Emily were dancing," said Clarissa, shrugging slightly. "They must be out on the terrace."

"My God," I said and ran off in the direction her head had tilted.

Plaster cupids had been set up on mansize columns all across the marble terrace. Beneath a cupid who was dripping fruit out of a horn of plenty stood Emily and a big dark guy who looked to be Tuveson Candler.

"This is hardly the act of a man on this engagement eve," Emily was saying.

Candler snorted and grabbed her. "Only one kiss," he said.

I jumped, caught his shoulder and spun him around. As I hit him with an unscientific punch something happened to the imitation column. It buckled and the cupid fell forward dropping wax apples and grapes.

A few feet away a smoking pistol was hanging in the air. I pushed the slumped Candler over and grabbed Emily. "Get down," I said.

"He surprised me," said Emily, kneeling.

"That's okay," I said, dragging her behind a stone urn that looked real. I glanced out and saw the pistol drifting off toward an open window. "He's going for Clarissa. Stay here."

Keeping my eye on the pistol,
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I moved up on it. I kept quiet, making sure it didn't turn in my direction.

"And now the fair Clarissa," said Hatch's voice. The pistol lifted and aimed into the ballroom.

I dived at where I figured he was and chopped at the pistol. The gun went off into the ballroom floor and I tried to knock Hatch down. I was lucky and connected with his invisible chin. He groaned and fell.

The Merrihugh guests had stopped dancing and were lining the windows to the terrace. I rolled Hatch over and sat on him.

Emily came out from behind the urn. "Are you all right, Bert?" She frowned. "You seem to be floating in air and the back portion of you is blurred."

"It's the emanations," I said. "Look. Keep the guests in there and see if you can get the police over here. Have them get hold of Plumrose. He's with Inspector McAfferty someplace."

"Yes," said Emily. She bent and kissed me. "I'm proud of you, Bert. You seem to have solved this all, whatever it is, completely by yourself."

"Plumrose and I figured it out," I said. "Now get the police."

Underneath me Hatch was coming to. "The snobs," he said. "The dirty snobs." **THE END**

FANTASTIC