

GUNMAN'S BLUFF

By Edgar Wallace

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Margaret Laferre, engaged to be married to Luke Maddison, is with him when he encounters Gunner Haynes, an American crook, in a London hotel lobby. Danton Morell, a friend of Margaret's brother, Rex, is watching them, and wonders if Gunner recognizes him after seven years. That night Rex is found dead and by his side a note addressed to his sister saying that he had been ruined by taking Luke Maddison's advice. Morell tells Maddison later that Rex had cashed a check for £18,000 signed by Maddison.

Margaret does not know that her sister is a forger. Her love for Maddison turns to hate but she keeps her promise to marry him.

Now go on with the story.

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

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

Margaret Leferre 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 a tattered comfort.

"There is nothing in the world I would not do to make life a little more smooth for you," he was 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 arm's length as he scrutinized her sadly. The pallor and the soft shadows beneath her eyes gave her an unearthly loveliness.

"Naturally I've been worried sick. What a fool I was on the phone to talk of insurance—it was indecent. I didn't just 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 at all bothered about bills, never to feel the frantic urge to go out and do something."

"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 wives' names. It's a sane thing to do—it keeps a man steady and it will make us really partners. Wait."

He was at the phone—as eager, as enthusiastic as a boy beginning a new and delightful game.

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

"You are!"

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

"You're mad, Luke—I didn't mean it."

She stood there, her hands gripped, her breath coming quickly and more quickly, and heard him override the

protests at the other end of the wire. Presently he hung up and turned to her, a smile of triumph on his face.

"You are Maddison's!" he said grandly. Lock, stock and barrel, darling—I am what old Bird calls a child of the poor."

Even she could not realize that he was speaking prophetically.

"Do you want to see a man named Lewing?" Stiles asked Maddison.

"Lewing? Who is he?"

From Mr. Stiles' expression of disparagement he gathered that Lewing was not of any great account.

"Show him in."

The man who followed Stiles into the room was tall and spare of build. His deep-set eyes had in them a furtiveness that was almost animal. He glanced quickly around the room, and it almost seemed to Luke that he was pricing every article within view against the night when he might enter and take away such movables as would show a profit.

"Mornin', sir."

He held his head downwards and sideways, looking up from under his heavy and untidy eyebrows.

"Like to speak to you in private, sir," he said in his husky voice.

Luke glanced at the manager and signalled him to leave the room. Mr. Stiles left with the greatest reluctance.

Not taking his eyes from Luke's face, the visitor stretched out a hand and drew a chair to him.

"Well?"

The visitor sat down.

"Gunner's got three moon for being a suspected," he said in a low, hoarse voice. "The Sparrer spoke up for him, but the beak handed out the three moon. The Gunner's appealing to the sessions."

Luke nodded.

"He has got three months hard labor and is appealing? I hope he gets off. Did he send you to me?"

Lewing nodded slowly. He had the appearance of a man who was lying and expected to be found out at any moment.

"Yes. A few quid would do him a bit of good. He wants a mouthpiece. The Sparrer says he'll get off—and the Sparrer knows."

"Who is the Sparrow?"

A slow smile dawned on Mr. Lewing's face.

"He's a busy—a detective. Bird by name—"

Luke nodded. He remembered Mr. Sparrow, whose activities were apparently not wholly confined to inquiries.

"I was inside meself—for breakin' and enterin', but they couldn't prove nothing so I got out. But me and Gunner was like brothers. He was in the next cell to me at Brixton and he told me to pop up and have a talk with you—a few quid would help him."

Luke was puzzled. His acquaintance with the gunman who called himself Haynes was a slight one, but it had struck him, during their brief interview at the Carlton, that the Gunner had the manner and certain the speech of a gentleman, and that this mean sneak thief who was look-

ing very steadily at him from the other side of the table was hardly the type of man in whom the Gunner would confide his commissions.

Luke felt in his pockets and took out a few pound notes.

"I suppose you know Mr. Bird very well?" he asked as he counted the money.

The man grinned.

"The Sparrer? I should say so! He's always going on about the children of the poor—but he's always lagging 'em. He pretends there's a lot of poor people who are suffering because of the likes of—of fellows who go on the crook. That's silly. If you can't work you've got to do something; you can't starve. The last time the Sparrer started talking to me about it I says—'Looke here, Mr. Bird, why don't you go after the rich and make them pay their whack to these children of the poor?' He couldn't answer me. He was dumb-founded. I'm always beating people in arguments."

He seemed rather proud of this accomplishment; was not without his vanities, even if he had to lie about his triumphs.

"Here is ten pounds. Give that to your friend. I can't help him much more. I'd like to know what happens to him, and he can write to me here."

At two o'clock Margaret Leferre stepped from her car at the door of the Marylebone registrar's office, and Luke, waiting in the room of that official, turned to greet the palest bride that had ever entered those commonplace portals.

She spoke not at all, only answered the questions that were put to her. With a shudder she felt the ring slip upon her finger.

It was all over so quickly that she could not believe that the first act of her vengeance was played. Somebody put a pen into her hand, and a squat forefinger showed her the place where she must sign her name. For a long time she held the pen, and when she wrote it wavered in her fingers and the scrawled signature looked like nothing she had ever seen.

Leaving for Paris that night—the Maurice, or was it the Bristol? There was some confusion in her mind as to the details; anyway, they did not matter if she kept her courage. The two o'clock wedding had been an inspiration. She went back to her house—Luke was coming to dinner; they were to leave immediately after to catch the night boat from Southampton.

Luke's voice was tremulous. They were alone in her pretty little drawing room, and he was sitting by her side, his arm around her. She was very still and unyielding, but he thought that he understood this.

Luke was bubbling over with excitement—he was like a boy who had received a new and wonderful present.

"I say, did you see that queer-looking man standing on the pavement as we came out—a fellow named Lewing—a thief of some kind. I wonder if he came to pick pockets? I'll bet he did; touched his hat to me as I came out."

She was not listening, and, after he had gone, could remember nothing

he had said except something about Rex. It was indecent of him to mention the boy. Danty rang her up, but she would not see or receive him. She must go through now without help. Luke was coming at seven. At six she called him on the telephone, and had one panicky moment when she feared that he had already left his flat and could not be found. Then she heard his voice.

"Darling, isn't it odd? I can't believe it—I still think of myself as a crusty old bachelor—"

"Luke, I want you to do something for me." She found her voice at last.

"No, do, don't interrupt. It's a big thing. I don't want to go away to-night, not for a day or two. I want to be alone, not to see you. My nerves are in a terrible state; I think I am on the verge of a breakdown."

As she went on, he listened with a growing sense of alarm and dismay. And yet he was not thinking of himself.

"I've been a selfish brute. Of course, darling, I understand."

The conversation did not occupy five minutes of time; he could hardly realize what was happening, to what he was agreeing, before he was sitting at his writing table staring blankly at the telegraph forms by which he was to cancel so many pleasant arrangements.

Danty, waiting at Waterloo Station with a full view of the barrier, watched the mail-boat passengers filter through to the platform. He saw the barrier close and the red tail lights of the train disappear in the darkness, and went home humming a little song, for Mr. and Mrs. Luke Maddison were not among the passengers.

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Luke did not even trouble to see Margaret at once. Before lunch he remembered and telephoned.

"I want to see you, darling," he began.

"Why?" It was difficult to disguise the suspicion she felt.

"I want you to sign a little document," he said gaily.

So that was it! Danty has warned her. Only she has never dreamed that she would be asked to renounce her marriage portion so soon.

"Wife! It's wonderful—unbelievable!"

"A document?"

"I want you to transfer some money to me. It's the merest formality—I've discovered that I have rather less than I need."

She thought quickly.

"Very well, come to the house at three o'clock."

He forgot that the bank closed at three-thirty and agreed. After all, it did not greatly matter if the check was returned. It was merely a transference from his private account to the bank's.

He was, true to his methods, five minutes late, when he was shown into the little sitting-room. The first thing that struck him that she was dressed. He had pictured her resting in her negligee—in bed even. She was not as pale as she had been. It was when he had taken her into his arms that he received the first shock.

"Don't kiss me—please."

It was not a request; it was a command.

"Why—what is wrong, darling?" She shook her head impatiently.

"Please tell me what you want?"

Her tone turned him cold. It was hard, almost antagonistic. He could hardly believe the evidence of his senses.

Stammering like a school boy, he told her in disjointed sentences of the situation which had arisen, and she listened and did not speak until he stopped.

"Ninety-seven thousand pounds," she said. "A tenth of that would have saved Rex."

He could only stare at her uncomprehendingly.

"It was rather dreadful to see a young man make a god of money, Luke and to know that for its sake he is willing to sacrifice even a young life."

To him her voice sounded like the clang of a bell; to herself it hardly seemed that it was she who was speaking.

"And to accuse this poor dead boy of forgery—to add that infamy to the other."

"I—you are speaking of me?" he said in a whisper.

"She nodded."

"Of you, I knew that you were coming to get your money back—that is why I did not go with you to France. I wanted it to happen here. Here, where I have friends and can meet you on even terms."

A pause, and then:

"Luke, I am giving you no money. You gave it to me—it is mine. Not a penny can you have—not a penny." She wished he would speak during the silence that followed. She wished he would rave, curse her, do all the things that were consistent with her picture of him. But he did nothing. He was not even looking at her, but was studying the pattern of the carpet. Presently he jerked up his head.

"Good-bye," he said, and turned on his heel.

She heard the door close on him, and then came to her a realization that made her brain reel. She loved him.

Why he gravitated to the Embankment he could never tell; it seemed a natural objective. He had no thought of suicide, no intention of finding that gross way to forgetfulness. Walking slowly by the parapet, he came to halt before Scotland Yard and eyed the Gothic building incuriously. That big detective was there—the Sparrow—who righted so many wrongs, could hardly disentangle the problem which deadened the mind of Luke Maddison.

"The children of the poor!"

He smiled mirthlessly.

He was one of the children of the poor, the natural charge of that big man. To protect the children of the poor and punish the wrongdoer, who had done wrong? Margaret? He tried hard to apportion all the blame to her, to hate her. He shook his head and walked slowly back towards Blackfriars.

TO BE CONTINUED

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