



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 Hayes, 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 is a forger. Her love for Maddison turns to hate but she keeps her promise to marry him.

After the wedding Margaret asks that the wedding journey be postponed, and that Luke leave her for two days, claiming that she is going to have a nervous breakdown.

In the meantime, Luke finds that he is short a sum of money at the bank, and rings up his wife to ask her to let him draw it. He is amazed to be refused, and by Margaret saying she will keep it in revenge for his ruining her brother. Luke is unable to reply, and leaves her. He wanders to the Thames embankment, trying to guess what the trouble is.

Now go on with the story.

Opposite the Temple Station he rested again. There was a narrow street, running up the strand—Norfolk street, wasn't it? And his lawyer had an office there. Why not see him and tell him all that had happened? It was the same thing to do. But then Luke Maddison realized that he was not sane. He was the maddest thing in the wide world.

He went on towards Blackfriars and came to a halt before the tram station. There was a long queue of people waiting to board the cars which arrived empty and went rolling along the Embankment crowded with humanity. Husbands and wives, possibly; young men going back to sweethearts who loved them; girls who had faith in some man or other and were ready to make every sacrifice for them. To Luke Maddison every car that drew away was laden with happy people, their day's work ended, the recreations and pleasures of the night before them.

Old men; young men; girls looking trim and smart; young men smoking big pipes, with a newspaper under their arms; bespectacled students—they hypnotized him, these great, blazing tramcars.

He was standing with his back to the parapet, his elbows resting on the stone.

"Are you waiting for anybody?"

The voice had authority, though it was quite kind. He looked up to meet the suspicious scrutiny of a City policeman. The City police do not like to see men lingering indecisively, one hand on the parapet, the swirling black river below—especially a white-faced man, with a tense face and an almost horrified stare.

"N-no," stammered Luke, "I'm just watching."

The policeman was looking at him curiously, as though he was trying to remember his face.

"I've seen you before somewhere, haven't I?"

"I daresay," said Luke, and turned away abruptly.

He followed the homeward wending crowd across Blackfriars Bridge. It was dark and cold, and he struggled into the overcoat which he had been carrying on his arm. He remembered somewhere in the borough that he entered a little coffee-house, redolent of burning lard.

At eleven o'clock it began to rain, a fine drizzle that very soon soaked through the light coat. He was walking aimlessly along York road in the direction of Westminster. A man ahead of him was slouching with his hands in his pockets and his coat collar turned up. Luke was wearing rubber-soled shoes, and came up to the walker before he was aware of his presence.

He saw the night wanderer lurch sideways with a snarl, stoop forward as though he were going to run, and then something in Luke's face or appearance checked his flight.

"Hullo," he said huskily. "Thought you were a busy."

Luke recognized him.

"You're Lewing, aren't you?"

The man peered into his face.

"Blimey, if it ain't—Mr. What's your name?—Maddison. What you doing down here? You should have come and seen me down Tooley street; this ain't my pitch."

Twice he looked back furtively over his shoulder.

"You thought I was a detective?"

The thin lips of the man twisted in a sneer.

"That's what I said. No, I thought you was one of Connor's lot. They chased me out of Rotherhithe to-night said I'd been nosing on them. That's why I'm around here. Connor's crowd

always thinks that someone's been nosing if one of his gang's dragged."

"Nosing? You mean spying?"

"Giving them away to the police. Connor's brother got caught the other night and they got a yarn down Tooley street that I'd done it."

Luke began to dimly understand.

"Come down here."

The claw-like hands of Lewing caught him and dragged him down a narrow, ill-lit street.

"I'm nervous to-night," he said, and he was speaking the truth, for his voice became a whimpering gasp.

"You're a gentleman, Mr. Maddison. You'd help a pore fellow to get away. You know what Connor is—he'd knife you for twopence. Bumping off, he calls it—he's an American; at least, he's been in Sing Sing—Sing Sing, is it? Anyway, it's a s'r. A couple of quid'd get me out of London, sir."

"I haven't got a couple of pounds with me," said Luke.

He was already weary of the companionship, and, but for being in his present condition, would never have submitted to being dragged into this foul little street.

"Perhaps I can call at your office in the morning?" And then, as he remembered: "I gave that ten pounds to the Gunner—"

"You gave nothing to the Gunner," said Luke. "Mr. Bird told me all about you."

There was an embarrassed silence.

"Anyway, I'd like you to stay with me, sir," said the man. "I called you a busy just now and you look like a busy. If any of them Connors see me with a busy they'll—"

They had just turned the corner into an even narrower street, and Lewing stopped suddenly. Four dark shapes, two on the pavement, two in the roadway, confronted them. Luke snarved them curiously. They all seemed to have caps drawn over their eyes; each man had both hands in his pockets.

"Here, what's the idea, Joe?"

Lewing's voice was a whine. "This gentleman is taking me around—"

The leader of the four laughed harshly.

"You've got to have a busy with you, have you?" he said with an oath.

"You ain't satisfied with nosing on us to Connors; but you got to carry Scotland Yard strapped under your arm. That's yours, Lewing!"

To Luke it only seemed that the man had edged a little closer to Lewing as he spoke. Lewing coughed and fell groggily against Luke.

"Get the busy," said a snarling voice.

Luke swung back but not quite in time. He saw the glitter of steel and felt as though an hot iron had been drawn across his breast; and then a curious weakness came on him, and he leaned back against the wall and gradually slipped into a sitting position. His last conscious impression was the clattering feet of running men; four dark shapes vanished into a greater darkness and he was left alone, with something that sprawled across the pavement, starting with unseeing eyes at the flickering light of the street lamps.

It was the thirteenth day after the disappearance of Luke Maddison, and a day of fate for his wife, since it put a period to the long and agonizing hours of doubt and uncertainty, of self reproach that at times amounted to self loathing. Twice she had been on the point of acquainting the police, and twice had Danty stooped her.

It was a time of worry for Danty also, but from quite another cause.

What had puzzled, and to some degree comforted her, was the fact that Mr. Stiles, the manager of Maddison's bank, had shown no particular anxiety. She guessed, or knew, that Luke had told him of her act, for when she had offered her check it had been refused. What she did not realize was that in the days before she became a factor in Luke Maddison's life, Luke was in the habit of disappearing into the blue. Invariably it was from Spain that Stiles had received a postcard notifying him of the imminent return of his employer. That country had a fascination for Luke Maddison. He spoke the language like a native. He was one

of the few Englishmen who understood and enjoyed the punctilio of bull fighting, and he loved nothing better than to retire to some lodging in Cordoba or Randa and, making that his headquarters, rove the countryside for weeks on end.

Stiles was uneasy, but he had that hope left, that in this great crisis of his affairs Luke Maddison had gone back to the scenes of his happy holidays.

Margaret opened a drawer of her desk, took out a folded sheet of paper and handed it to Morrell. It was a telegram addressed to Margaret Maddison:

You can hardly expect me to come back to you. In a few months I will furnish you with sufficient evidence to enable you to get a divorce. I am not without money, therefore I am not entirely without pleasant consolation. It was signed "Luke," and had been handed in at Paris at 8:30 that morning.

"That's right," she said. Her tone was light, but there was an agitation in her heart which she had not imagined possible.

Consolations! And this was Luke Maddison, the idealist—a vulgar philanderer, who had fled to consolations. "I'm rather surprised that you got this," said Danton gravely. "I would not have thought he would trouble to wire."

A few days later, on the center page of the Post Herald Margaret saw the photograph of a haggard and unshaven man. It had evidently been taken in a hospital bed. His eyes were closed; the photograph just showed the edge of the sheet a few inches under his chin.

Do You Know This Man? demanded the headline.

She glanced at the type, and saw it had reference to a murder that had been committed in South London, and that he whose picture was shown had been present and had only escaped death by the narrowest of margins. Not even his dearest friend would have recognized Luke Maddison, for the photograph had not been taken until the eleventh day of his detention in hospital, and it had been taken in a very poor light.

They put Luke Maddison in a private ward, and one morning they left a little temperature chart with him

view, and he saw that his name was Smith.

"How long have I been Smith?" His voice was extraordinarily strong, remembering that only a few days before he had not been able to speak above a whisper.

The good-natured nurse grinned cheerfully.

"If we don't know people's names we call them Smith—preferably Bill," she said. "But you're going to be good, aren't you, and tell us yours?"

He shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. Smith is a very good name, borne by some very nice people. If my name had been Smith I might have been a better man," he added.

Since they had moved him into the private ward the burly-looking policeman who had loomed out of his dreams, and seemed part of them, had been taken away. That day they thought he was dying a police magistrate has been summoned to take his deposition; but he had told nothing which was of any value. Moreover, he had heard one detective tell ano-

ther that he would not be of the slightest value as a witness at the inquest. So he could afford to lie and watch the hours pass.

He did not really care what happened after. It was his sixteenth or seventeenth day in bed—he was not sure which—when his sister came in.

TO BE CONTINUED

IDEAL WEATHER LURES MANY OUT ON PICNICS

The warm balmy weather of last Sunday was taken advantage of by several local residents who motored to Blue River, where they enjoyed a very pleasant picnic dinner in the open. Those included in the group were Mr. and Mrs. C. E. Kenyon, Mrs. W. N. Long, George Perkins, Adeline Perkins, Barbara Adams, Mr. and Mrs. C. E. Swarts, Miss Edna Swarts, and Mrs. R. B. Oldham.

Shops in City—Mrs. Thelma Marks, of Mabel, was an out of town shopper in this city on Saturday.



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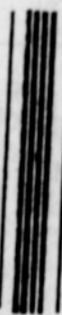
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