

*The Man With the
Blue Nose*

Harvey J. O'Higgins

Illustrated by

Roy Fisher

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The Man With the Blue Nose

By HARVEY J. O'HIGGINS

ILLUSTRATED BY ROY FISHER

Like a blank and insurmountable wall was the mystery of the Clements robbery. Its smooth, cold surface offered no foothold for the most agile mental scaler until Duff, the private detective who looked like what he used to be, turned his uncanny skill to the job.

Duff never looked like a detective. "In my business," he said, "you can't afford to." And, at the moment, he looked most like the unshaven patron of a Bowery doss-house, sucking his lonely morning pipe on a bench in Washington Square.

He had obviously slept in his clothes. His coat, his knee-bagged trousers, his soiled and wilted white collar were all as wrinkled as pajamas. Even his moustache needed a brush and comb, because he had a way of wiping the back of his hand across his mouth from right to left, so that the moustache was dragged over untidily to the left side of his pipe. It was a gesture that went well with the costume: it was what an actor would have called a good piece of character business; but, as a matter of fact, he used it as a signal.

On the signal, now, a newsboy who had been studying him from the south side of the Square, as if with a commercial eye, came up the path to him. (It was early in the morning and the Square was empty.) Duff watched him approach—watched him with a twinkle under the sweat-greased brim of his felt hat, for the boy's manner was so nervous that he looked guilty.

"I'd pinch you on it, any time," Duff grumbled.

"Want a paper, boss?" He was an undernourished small boy, and he offered the paper in a timid pretence of being a genuine newsy.

Duff stretched a huge lazy leg and explored a trouser pocket. "Do I look as if I could spend money on a paper, Mickey?"

"No, sir."

"Besides, this's yesterday's paper."

Mickey's faltering smile admitted it.

“Do you know the editorial page when you see it?”

He nodded.

Duff held out a nickel. “Next time, sneak the editorial page out of the paper *he* gives you and slip it inside the paper you sell *me*. Get me? I’d look nice buying yesterday’s paper if any one was tailing me, wouldn’t I?”

The boy nodded again, watching him with eyes as brown and eager as a spaniel’s.

“You get so much fun out of this business,” Duff teased him, “you ought to be charged admission. Run along and sell your morning murders.”

Mickey, grinning, looked around him as if for another customer, and then drifted back to his station on the south side of the square. Duff opened his paper.

He glanced over the pages idly, indifferently, in the manner of a genial fat loafer sunning himself on a warm September morning. He knocked his pipe out and refilled it with loose tobacco from the gaping side-pocket of his coat, but he did not relight it. Something on the editorial page caught his eye. In the middle of the second column, scattered pencil dots had been marked for him, and under the printed letters, very lightly, through several paragraphs. He got out a pair of rusty-rimmed old spectacles, and having read the message, he grunted impatiently, folded the paper so as to make a strip of the first three columns of editorials, and felt in his vest pocket as if for a match.

He found no match, but a small piece of graphite caught under the nail of his thumb, and with this—holding the paper before him as if he were merely reading it—he pressed a pencil mark under a letter here and there as his thumb moved down the edge of the column of print. He stopped to take the pipe out of his mouth and yawned gigantically; and whatever else was cover and disguise about him, the yawn was real.

It was real enough to catch the eye of a meditative young man who was limping down the path toward him, from the direction of Fifth Avenue, with a heavy walking stick and a lame leg. Duff saw him in the middle of the yawn, and swallowed the end of it. “Hello!” he said to himself. “That’s Billy Woodbridge.” And he went back to the paper on his knee, innocently intent on the news.

oodbridge stared and frowned as he came nearer, his straw hat in his hand, the sun on his tanned bald forehead. He was fashionably dressed, in light summer grey, with silk socks and low shoes and a soft collar. He put on his hat to shade his eyes and puckered them in a puzzled scrutiny of Duff as he passed.

Duff ignored him.

He went by, stopped, felt in his breast pocket for his cigarette case, and limped back to ask: "Have you a match?"

"Yes, Billy, and so have *you*," Duff replied. He produced a box of matches as he spoke, and he held them out, in the manner of an absent mind, still reading.

Woodbridge took them as if from a stranger, but with an amused and excited twitching of his mouth. He said, "Thanks, Major," when he had lit his cigarette.

Duff grunted and put out a blind hand for the match box. "All right," he said. "If you live near here, go ahead and I'll follow you in a minute."

He dropped the newspaper on the seat beside him, lit his pipe, and sat smoking till he saw Woodbridge pass Mickey, the newsboy, at the end of the path. Then he brushed his hand across his mouth from right to left again, stretched, and rose to walk away in the opposite direction from Mickey, leaving his newspaper on the bench. Mickey promptly started toward him, watching as if he feared that Duff might turn and claim his paper. Duff did not turn, and Mickey carefully restored the paper to its original creases and put it with the others that were under his arm.

"Pay-pee!" he cried. "Mourny pay-pee!"

He had been silent hitherto. He carried his bundle, now, toward the north side of the Square, calling as he went.

Duff turned away toward the eastern side. One of his worn shoes had come untied, and he sat down to knot the laces. While he was ostentatiously busy at that, he saw a man servant issue from the basement of an old residence on the north side of the Square, buy several newspapers from the boy, and go back into the house with them.

"Pay-pee!" Mickey cried triumphantly. "Mourny pay-pee!" He turned up Fifth Avenue and passed out of sight.

And even if anyone had been there to suspect him, it would not have been easy to guess that Mickey and the houseservant were both "plants":

that Mickey was a detective, in the small, whom Duff employed to watch and follow “suspects” as a newsboy: that Duff had received the report of one of his operatives from Mickey—on the editorial page of the paper—and written his orders on the same sheet, and sent Mickey to deliver it to another operative who was under cover as a servant in the Washington Square house.

Precautions were necessary—elaborate precautions—because Duff had two operatives planted in the house, one of whom was known to the family and the other was not. The first could keep in touch with Duff in the usual way, but the other had to be more careful. There had been a spectacular robbery in the house—the Clements robbery. The servants were suspected of complicity, and the first operative was investigating that part of the affair. But, to Duff, there had been more in the Clements robbery than met the eye; he wanted to get what he called “a line on the family,” and he had planted the second man for that purpose. Hence the complicated machinery of newsboy and editorial page to reach and direct this second operative.

And for all his machinery, Duff was arriving nowhere. He was as far from getting a line on the family as he was from opening communications with Mars. He knew it. Even while he had been marking his message into the editorial page, he knew it. The knowledge had suddenly oppressed him like an indigestion, and he had yawned. And in the midst of the yawn, lo! Billy Woodbridge had appeared.

Instantly, from the back of Duff’s mind there had leaped into memory an incident that he had wholly forgotten. When he first went on the Clements case, Helen Clements, the daughter of the house, had been curious about him. Naturally. Her father had told her that he had employed “the best man in America,” to investigate the robbery, and she was as interested to meet Duff as if he had been Sherlock Holmes. When she heard from Duff that he had served with Military Intelligence, during the war, she asked: “Did you know Willy Woodbridge?”

Yes, he had known Willy Woodbridge. Woodbridge had also served with Military Intelligence. But Duff had not known Woodbridge intimately. Woodbridge had been on desk-work and Duff had been out on his feet. They had met only occasionally at a lunch club, made up chiefly of Bohemians in uniform who had been unable to get to the front, and this club some wit had named “General Hindquarters.” There, once or twice, they had sat side by side and listened to an after-luncheon speech, but that was all. Duff had not seen Woodbridge since the war ended, and he had nothing to tell Helen

Clements by way of news of him. She had never mentioned Woodbridge again, and Duff had forgotten him—until he limped into the picture, from nowhere, when Duff was yawning with discouragement.

Was it a piece of incredible good luck? Or was it as meaningless as most of the casual incidents of life? Duff intended to find out. He proposed to “rope” Woodbridge, to learn all he knew of the Clements family, and to use him, if that were possible, in some way on the case.

With these things in his mind he sat patiently watching Woodbridge limp around the Square till he came to Waverly Place and turned toward Sixth Avenue. Then Duff rose to follow, his eyes on the path, as if he were one of those city beach-combers who are always on the lookout for anything that may have been dropped on the sidewalk or in the gutter.

He followed Woodbridge along the deserted pavement in the empty, early sunlight—a shabby old derelict walking behind a gentlemen of some degree of fashion, with whom he could naturally have no possible connection. About half way down the block, Woodbridge turned up a flight of entrance steps and disappeared into a vestibule—the vestibule of an old red-brick house with a Colonial doorway painted white. It had evidently once been a private home, but judging by the row of letter boxes in the vestibule it was now an apartment house. Duff entered it as nonchalantly as if he were the janitor; and Woodbridge opened the inner door to him with a conspiring smile.

“Well, you old high-flyer,” Duff greeted him in a hoarse undertone, “how’ve you been?”

The “high-flyer” referred to the final incident of Woodbridge’s service with Military Intelligence; he had gone to report on the distribution of propaganda over the German lines; and on this first flight in an observation plane, he had crashed and broken his leg. Hence his limp.

He grinned as Duff caught him by the hand and wrung it jovially. “Come upstairs to my rooms,” Woodbridge said. “There’s nobody up there.”

“Fine!” Duff chuckled. “I want to talk to you. Where’ve you been? I haven’t seen you for—how long *is* it? Three years, isn’t it?”

“Yes. All of that. What are you doing? You’re not with M.I. still, are you?”

Duff took him by the elbow, to help him up the stairs. "Billy," he said, "I'm now about the only man of *my* kind in America. I'm an *honest* private dick."

"A detective? No!"

"Sure's you live! What're *you* doing?"

"I went back to writing."

"Well," Duff sighed, as they climbed the stairs together, "I couldn't go back to law. It was too darn slow. I got an offer from an airplane firm to do some investigating for them. I took a lot of the boys in with me—and here I am, having a whale of a good time and making more money than I did as a lawyer."

"Well!" Woodbridge had taken a bunch of keys on a chain from his hip-pocket and unlocked a door at the head of the stairs. They entered a living room that was almost as large as the whole floor of the house.

Duff looked around it with a hearty admiration. "Gosh, Billy," he boomed—now that the door was closed—"this looks comfortable. Do you have it all to yourself?"

It had evidently been furnished by a woman whose fancy had run to Chinese rugs, great wicker chairs with China-blue cushions, gate-legged tables, parchment lampshades, and early davenport. Woodbridge's own taste might have added the Japanese prints on the walls, the Georgian book cases, and the cushioned window-seats, but the rest was certainly feminine.

"Yes," he said. "All to myself." And he glanced at it as if he had been lonely there.

Duff threw his hat on a table. "I'm almost afraid to sit down in a place like this. I've been hanging around a dirty joint all night, and I feel crawly."

"What were you doing in the Square?"

He had been waiting for Woodbridge to ask that question. He had been so eagerly waiting that he naturally pretended not to hear the question when it came. "What say?" he asked.

"What were you doing down in the Square when I ran into you?"

"Oh, nothing to write home about. There's been a robbery in one of those old houses on the north side, and we've doped it out that one of the servants hooks in on it. So we made a preliminary investigation and pretended we suspected the second man and had him fired. And now I've

got one of our boys in his place, under cover, and I was over there picking up his report. What was the matter with you? You looked worried.”

“Me? Worried?”

“Yes, worried. I saw you before you saw me. What’s been eating you?”

Woodbridge scowled at his cigarette. “Oh, nothing. Nothing you could help me with, anyway.”

Duff was twisting his bedraggled moustache back into curl. He looked down his cheek at it. “Well, you can’t always tell,” he joked. “Wait till you see me shaved.”

He knew that Woodbridge must have heard of the Clements robbery: the papers had been full of it. And when he said, “There’s been a robbery in one of those old houses on the north side,” he was sure that Woodbridge, knowing the Clements family, would know that he was working on a robbery in their home. He had expected an admission from Woodbridge of his acquaintance with the family. Nothing of the sort came. And Duff, behind his cheerful jocularly about Woodbridge’s worry, was saying to himself: “I’ll have to get this bird. There’s something in his crop. I’ll bet he can help me with this Clements case.”

The Clements case was immensely important to Duff. Not because of the crime, but because of the client. He was like a young doctor with his first rich patient; the disease might be no more than simple indigestion, but the cure of it might mean as much to his practice as if he discovered an antitoxin for tuberculosis. Andrew Clements was the president of a Broadway bank and a Wall Street trust company; he was vice-president of the A.P.U. and a director of several railroads and public utility companies; and, back of all this, he was one of the real controlling heads of the amalgamated power-production plants of half the continent. If Duff could “sell” himself to Clements, as the advertising men say, he could get the most lucrative and easy practice that the money barons of America can provide for a confidential agent. Duff was curious about them; he was curious to see the inside workings of their so-called “invisible government” of the country. And he was curious about Clements; he was curious to learn the quality of the man’s mind, the range of his ability, the explanation of his power.

It was undoubtedly this sort of curiosity in Duff that had made him a detective, as it might have made him a scientist or a realistic artist—a Balzac, perhaps. And in his work as a detective he showed a pretty

combination of the artist's imaginative sympathy and the scientist's cold deductive logic. He was neither a mathematical genius simply—a Sherlock Holmes calculating machine that added up evidence with automatic accuracy—nor yet one of those inspired idiots of the profession who “play hunches,” as they say, and often arrive at miraculously correct conclusions by some mystery of intuition which they do not understand themselves. No, Duff was neither of these species of detective. He was a bit of both. He worked almost wholly by human contact, feeling his way into the solution of a crime through the persons involved in it, and then manoeuvring them to such effect that guilt betrayed and trapped itself.

In the Clements case he had not been able to feel his way into any understanding of several details that baffled him. Andrew Clements and his daughter Helen had both remained impervious to Duff's penetration. It seemed to him that there was something in the case which the family kept locked against him. He had to find that something. He had to find it, even against old Andrew Clements' opposition, and certainly without his aid, if he was to make on Clements the impression of superior astuteness which he desired to make.

These things were in the back of his thought as he chatted idly with Woodbridge. He had an idea that if he could find out what was troubling Woodbridge and help him, Woodbridge might aid him in the Clements case out of gratitude. Unfortunately, he could find out nothing. Woodbridge, before the war, had been a free-lance writer of magazine articles and short stories; he was now a sort of editorial adviser in a publisher's office, and he professed to hate the work, but Duff did not believe that it was this discontent that had taken him out of bed at seven in the morning. Duff studied him. He was obviously an idealistic and impractical New Englander, with an Emersonian long nose and two heavy lines of discouragement from his narrow nostrils to the down-drawn corners of his mouth.

“The trouble with you is that you're bored,” Duff said, untruthfully. “You ought to come in with me and the boys. You see, some of them that were in M.I. with me—they found that they were getting a dirty deal when the war was over, and we formed a little organization to help one another, and when I started this detective business I took them in with me. Bob Benedict's my office manager. We have a house, a sort of boarding house, over on Eleventh Street, where we hang out, and we call it General Hindquarters, after the old lunch club. Why don't you come in with us?”

“I’d like to,” Woodbridge answered, insincerely, “if I weren’t so tied up.”

“Well”—Duff rose—“I must go and get cleaned up. Come and have lunch with me at the Wyndham at one. I’ve a case I’d like to talk to you about.”

“I’ll be glad to,” he said, but it was evident that he accepted out of mere unwillingness to offend Duff by declining.

“You know this Clements family, don’t you, Billy?” Duff asked, as if it were an afterthought, at parting.

“Well I used to. Why?”

“The robbery that I’m working on was over in their house.”

He nodded, somewhat embarrassed. “Yes, I know. I used to go to college with the son, Hal Clements, but I haven’t seen any of them for years.”

They were at the door, and Duff, defeated, was consoling himself with the thought that he would contrive to come to the lunch with some bait which Woodbridge would be unable to resist. “All right, Billy,” he said. “I’ll look for you at one.” He had his hand on the door-knob.

Someone rapped sharply on the panel outside.

“Just a minute,” he said. He looked around him quickly. “I don’t want anyone to see me here, in this costume. Is that your bedroom?”

Woodbridge nodded.

“I’ll just duck in there, if you don’t mind.”

There were three doors at the end of the room. One was the bedroom door; another was the open door of a bathroom; the third showed a sort of corner cupboard that had been fitted up as a kitchenette. Duff shut himself in the bedroom, while Woodbridge opened the hall door—to find Tony, the iceman, waiting with the beaming smile with which he covered his inability to speak the language.

“Oh, hello,” Woodbridge said. “Brought the ice, have you? All right.” He went into his pocket for change while Tony carried his butter-firkin of ice into the kitchenette.

And Duff, with his hand on the bedroom door, stood blinking at a picture of Helen Clements on the wall above Woodbridge’s dresser. “Well,” he said to himself, “you old woodchuck!” He walked over to it quietly. There was

an affectionate message to Woodbridge written on the photograph in her firm backhand. It was a girlish photograph, however—a portrait that looked some years younger than she was now.

He dropped his eyes to another photo on the dresser, a portrait of a dark woman who wore a medieval fillet around her temples. She regarded him inscrutably with a level eye. There was no inscription on this picture, but at the bottom of the heavy card-board backing on which the photograph was mounted, he saw the white corner of a calling card protruding. Nothing could have been more casual and innocent than his manner as he took up this photograph, drew the calling card from the slit in the mount, found that it was the card of a “Mrs. Albert Brewston,” and read on the back of it “Yes, darling, yes! With everything that is in me. Lena.”

He replaced the card, thoughtfully, in its hiding-place, put the photo in the inside pocket of his coat, regarded Miss Clements’ photograph on the wall as if she were there before him, silent, and returned to his place at the door. When Tony had departed, he came out with his hat on the back of his head and his hands in his pockets. “All right, Billy,” he said, genially. “Don’t forget. The Wyndham at one.”

Duff never looked like a detective; that was one of the minor secrets of his success; and when he was receiving clients in his public office, he looked as little like a sleuth as he did anywhere else. At his desk, indeed, he looked most like what he had been before he volunteered for service with Military Intelligence during the war; he looked like a cheerfully unsuccessful office lawyer.

He had obtained the perfect background of this appearance by buying it from a discouraged patent attorney who had retired from practice. “If you haven’t any old clothes of your own,” he would explain genially to his friends, “you have to buy them. These fit me pretty well. The fellow that owned them must have been about my size as a lawyer.”

The carpet on the floor had been swept threadbare. The walnut desk shone only where it had been polished by the owners’ elbows. The leather cushion in the tired old swivel chair had been worn through to its horsehair stuffing. When Duff put on the office coat that went with the rest of the stage properties, he fitted into the old room as snugly as the room fitted into the old red-brick house, or the house into the dingy old street, off Union Square, that was given over mostly to second-hand book stores and antique furniture shops.

He had hurried back to his desk from Woodbridge's apartment, having changed his clothes in his rooms on Eleventh Street, and phoned to ask Helen Clements if she could call at his office for a moment. "You'd better leave your car in Union Square," he told her, "and walk around the block so the chauffeur won't see where you go. There's an architect's office on the first floor. I'm right above it on the front of the building. I want to report to you on the robbery."

Since some of the servants were supposed to be involved in the crime, his directions about the chauffeur were a natural precaution. But when Miss Clements arrived—less excited than curious and less curious than amused—he had nothing of moment to report. "Your maid wasn't concerned in it," he said. "I think I've located one man who was in on the job. He's over in London. But I haven't found the stuff."

She smiled at him lazily. "You know that 'the stuff' doesn't matter. Dad wants nothing but the man who gagged him and tied him to the bed-post. When you find *him*, you'll have to find some way to have him hanged. Nothing short of hanging him will satisfy Dad."

Fashionably dressed, in the small toque of the day and the short skirt, she was handsome, large, athletic-looking. She had a somewhat sarcastic twist to her lips when she smiled, and she spoke as if Duff and she tacitly enjoyed an understanding of the more human traits of her autocratic father.

Duff laughed. "He must have been a foreigner. Any native crook would have known he couldn't do a thing like that to Andrew Clements and get away with it."

"Not," she agreed, "while there's money enough in the financial district to buy revenge."

"Well," he concluded, "I have a man going after him. I'm not telling your father. He'd want me to send my whole staff over in an airplane. And listen. Do you remember once—when you heard I'd worked with Military Intelligence—you asked me if I'd run across a man named Woodbridge?"

"Yes. Willy Woodbridge. What has *he* to do with it?"

"Nothing whatever. But, if you remember, I told you I hadn't seen him since the war?"

"Yes. I remember."

"Well, I ran into him crossing Washington Square this morning."

"It must have been in the very early morning," she said.

“Why so?”

She shrugged her eyebrows rather than her shoulders. “Because he never goes by when he thinks he might meet any of the Clements family.”

“Oh.” He considered that.

Whether or not he had consciously assumed the immobility of a weighty office lawyer, he certainly had that manner. He was slow. He was meditative. He spoke out of a sort of deep-chested ponderosity. She watched him with eyes that were a little disillusioned about life—but frankly so.

Duff had discovered in her a delight in rough contacts. He had discovered that the one thing she asked in people was that they should be “real.” There was no one she would not meet on those terms, but she would not endure pretensions. (Probably for that reason she did not succeed as well with women as with men—particularly with women who had social pretensions.) Duff had decided that her air of being as democratic as the occasion demanded was based on the aristocratic conviction that her own social position was secure beyond jeopardizing, but it was not easy to decide how far he might presume on that sense of security.

He said professionally: “Could you tell me what’s the matter with Woodbridge? I got to know him pretty well in Washington and I liked him. From what little I saw of him this morning I should say he was fairly unhappy. I’ve a hunch that I might help him.”

She had no illusions about detectives nor about successful men. She had been curious to meet Duff when her father reported that he had employed “the best man in America” to investigate the robbery, and she had been amused to see how easily Duff handled her distinguished parents; but she did not believe in disinterested motives in detectives or in any other men of practical affairs; and she had seen enough of Duff to know that his appearance of frank simplicity covered depths of astuteness.

She gave him an ironical smile and glanced around the office. “I didn’t know that it was any part of your work to make people happy.”

He was silent. She looked at a rusty old engraving or two. When she came back at last to Duff she found him sunk in meditation, unconscious of her, fingering his moustache, and staring ahead of him at nothing—at nothing unless it was at the memory of all the unhappiness that his eyes had ever seen.

Those eyes—now that the habitual smile and twinkle had gone out of them—she saw were gloomy, wrinkled eyes that could open very large and brown in a melancholy reflectiveness. He looked down quickly at his blotter. He rose. “No,” he said, “you’re quite right. Well, I’ll be able to take my operative out of your servants’ quarters at the end of the week.” He had picked up a typewritten letter from his desk; he frowned at it. “I don’t think there’ll be any further difficulty.”

It was the manner of dismissal, but she did not rise. “What do you want to know about him?” she asked.

He looked at her, quite absent-minded for a moment. He walked away and gazed out his window. He came back and sat down again at his desk. And all this, of course, was what detectives call “finessing.”

He said, at last, out of his thoughts, as if with no attempt at all to present them to her in any order or with any craft: “Something serious has happened to him. It isn’t only the accident to his leg, though his lameness may have affected him. And it isn’t money troubles. He doesn’t seem to like his work, but that’s only a surface worry. I believe it’s a woman.”

“You said you’d only *met* him this morning. Now you tell me—”

“I met him about seven o’clock. I went to his rooms and had a long talk with him. He didn’t tell me what’s the matter—I’m only guessing at it.” He had risen again and gone thoughtfully to his street coat that hung on a hat-rack beside a filing cabinet.

She said, with reluctance: “He met a woman in Paris.”

He had taken something from a pocket of the coat. “Is that the woman?” he asked, and handed her a photograph.

It came with the suddenness of sleight-of-hand, and it startled her so obviously that she did not need to answer. She reddened when she looked up from the portrait and realized that her surprise had answered for her. “What is this?” she demanded. “Are you getting evidence against him for a divorce suit?”

“Who is she?” he asked.

“She’s a Mrs. Bert Brewston.”

“Thank you. And her maiden name was?”

“Selina Auld. That’s all I’m going to tell you.” She got up. “I don’t like myself in the role of informer.”

He might have answered that it was not unbecoming to her. It had heightened her color and stirred up a glow in her eyes. She stood, leaning on the back of her chair rather mannishly, and offered him her hand.

“Will you let me report progress to you?” he asked. “We’re like all other criminals—we detectives. We have to have an audience.”

“Gladly. Goodbye. Good luck to you—if you’re really trying to help him.” She swung to the door, high-shouldered, as if she were leaving a drawing-room in full state. “If you’re not trying to help him,” she added, as he opened the door for her, “you’ll hear unpleasantly from your audience.”

She strode out, without turning her head. He closed the door behind her and returned to the photo on his desk.

Mrs. Bert Brewston—Selina Auld. He drew out the card, again, and re-read it. “Yes, darling, yes. With everything that is in me. Lena.” He turned it over and over moodily in his fingers, frowning.

He began to plan how he should feel his way into the situation cautiously.

He reached his office phone. “Who’s in there?” he asked an inner office. “Who? Well, ask Benedict to come here.”

He returned Mrs. Brewston’s card to its slit in the backing of her photograph, and got up to put on his street coat.

“Bob,” he said, to the young man who entered, “you remember Billy Woodbridge? Down in Washington?”

Benedict thought a moment. He was a boyish, dark young secretary in a Palm Beach suit. “Oh yes,” he recalled. “Woodbridge. Yes.”

Duff was not in the habit of telling his operatives the truth about the cases on which they worked; and he explained, now, to Benedict: “I ran into him this morning, and he’s in trouble, and I want to help him, but we’ll have to do it without letting him know. Put this photo in an inside pocket. I took it out of his apartment, to find out who she is. I want you to replace it.” He was rapidly sketching the plan of an apartment on a memorandum pad.

Benedict nodded. “Sure. How do I get in?”

“I’ll have to arrange that for you, some way. And while you’re in his flat, I want you to look for any letters signed ‘Lena’ or ‘Selina.’ There’s a writing

desk, about here, in the living room, and the letters may be in that, or they may be hidden somewhere. I think she's making the trouble, and I want to find out what's going on."

He glanced at his watch. He went to look out the window a moment. Benedict put the photograph and the plan of the apartment in the inside breast pocket of his coat and stood waiting.

"Yes," Duff decided. "That will be all right. I'm to have lunch with Woodbridge, at the Wyndham, at one. Be there at ten minutes to—in the lobby. I've told him you're working with me, so there's no need of any cover. All right. See you at ten to one. Goodbye."

It was not for nothing that the Duff Investigating Agency had been presented to Woodbridge as a sort of fraternal association of oppressed veterans of the great war who had united to aid and defend one another. In the lobby of the Wyndham at one o'clock, the tall ascetic Woodbridge met Duff and his young office manager in the manner of a crippled war veteran greeting a pair of pals who had served with him in Military Intelligence.

"You remember Bob, don't you, Billy?" Duff introduced Benedict.

"Well, rather!" Woodbridge shook hands as heartily as if Benedict and he were old friends, and his lean monastic face was warm and bright with smiles. "Are you going to have lunch with us?" he asked.

"No, thanks. I can't," Benedict said, shyly, like the young lieutenant invited by a civilian to have luncheon with the commander-in-chief.

Duff explained: "I want him to run over to your rooms for me. I dropped some memoranda somewhere, this morning, and it may be that I dropped them in your bedroom. That's the last place I remember having them. Lend us your key a minute, Billy, and he can look for them while we're eating."

"Why, certainly." Woodbridge had all his keys together on the chain that ran from his belt into a hip-pocket of his trousers. He was carrying a straw hat and the walking stick that he needed for his lame leg; and when he drew out the bunch of keys on their ring, he had only one hand free to pick out and remove from the ring the keys to the street and hall doors of his apartment.

"Let me do that," Duff volunteered; and instead of removing from the ring the two keys which Woodbridge had separated from the others, Duff

unfastened the ring from the chain and gave the whole bunch of keys to Benedict.

“Trot along now, Bob,” he said blandly. “We’ll be here for an hour, anyway. If you find those notes, you might stop at the office and leave them with Bert before you come back. We’ll give you an hour.”

It was done so quickly that Woodbridge had no time to object, even if he had wished to. And why should he object? He was in the hands of friends.

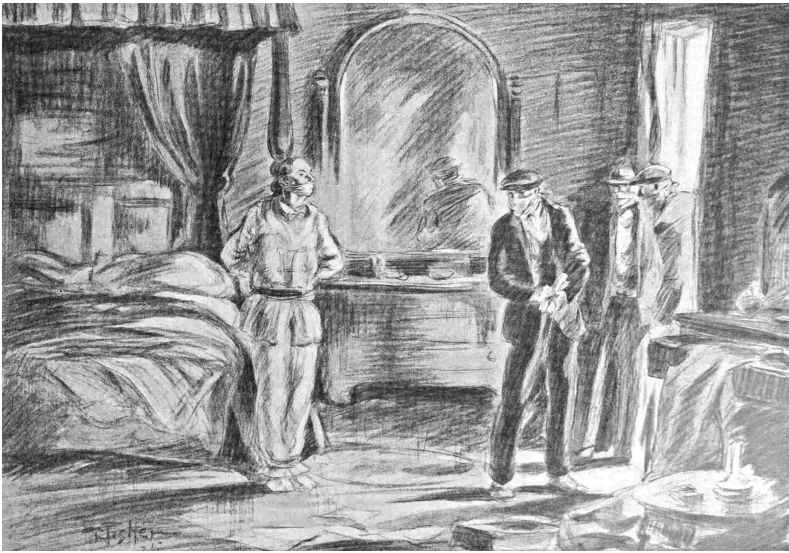
Duff turned him toward the stairs that led down to the Wyndham’s basement grill.

They made themselves comfortable and examined the menu in the silence of old acquaintances, who do not need to keep up conversation. Woodbridge, in his light summer grey, with a polka-dot necktie and a soft collar, got out his inevitable cigarette and lit it at the waiter’s match that illuminated, ruddily, his high tanned forehead. He gave his order without reference to Duff. Duff was equally casual and self-contained. When the waiter withdrew, he leaned forward, his arms on the table, resting his massive shoulders. “Billy,” he said, “that Clements robbery was the work of ex-soldiers.”

“It *was!*”

“I’m sure of it. This is between ourselves, you understand. It was pulled off as smoothly as a night raid. There was discipline behind it. They hardly spoke a word. They got in a basement window, rounded up the servants, and marched them like a squad of Heinies to the picture gallery—where they locked them up. You remember the picture gallery?”

“Very well.”



“Then the lad in charge woke old Andrew Clements, gagged him and trussed him to his own bed-post.”

“Then the lad in charge of the operation woke old Andrew Clements, gagged him, trussed him up, and tied him to his own bed-post—”

“Where was Helen?”

“She was away for the night. And I believe they knew it. They were in the house from midnight till about four in the morning, taking their time and ransacking the whole place thoroughly. They cleaned up all the jewelry, some of the smaller pieces of silverware and every cent of cash. Then they blew the old man’s private safe and went through it with a vacuum cleaner. They must have been off and away for two hours before the people next door heard the servants shouting—after they’d piled up furniture and tried to reach the gallery skylights and found they couldn’t make it. That was about six o’clock. The police broke in the basement door at eight. And there they all were still locked in with the pictures. The man who bossed the job must have known—for one thing—that the picture gallery was as tight as a jail, yet I’ll swear that none of the servants were in on the deal—and none of the ex-servants that had ever been in the house.”

“What’s the answer?” Woodbridge asked.

“I haven’t the faintest notion. Thanks. Now bring me a glass of buttermilk.” He paused till the waiter was out of hearing. “Did you know the son who was killed in the war?”

“Hal? Yes.”

“What was he like?”

And since this was the question to which he had been leading up, he gave it as if he asked it, at the end of his story, just to make conversation and let Woodbridge talk a while.

Woodbridge felt friendly. That was plain. But it was also plain that he was reluctant to talk about Hal Clements. They had been chums at Harvard, he said, but Hal had been “a wild boy—not so bad until his mother died, but, after that, pretty hard to hold.” The father had not been wise about him.

“He hated his father, did he?” Duff asked, busy with his food.

“Well,” Woodbridge admitted, “he was his mother’s favorite. She and Helen rather spoiled him. The household was a good deal split up.”

“A boy like that often goes bad,” Duff put in, “to spite the father. I don’t mean that he does it consciously, but that’s the way it works out. He drinks, gambles, gets into trouble with women, and generally disgraces himself, because, away down deep, he’s trying to disgrace the father. The more the father screams, the better satisfied he is, and the worse he becomes. Was that the way it went?”

“Yes. Pretty much.”

“How did it end?”

Woodbridge put down his fork and lit a cigarette. He inhaled a chest full of smoke and exhaled it through his nostrils like a sigh made visible. “Well,” he said, “this will have to be entirely between ourselves, Major.”

“Absolutely.”

“He forged his father’s name to a check, to pay off a gambling debt. That was in the winter of 1914. And the old man started to put him in jail. I had him hidden in my rooms, and I kept in touch, through Helen, with what the father was doing. Finally—it was Hal’s own idea—I went to Mr. Clements with the proposition that Hal should be allowed to go to Canada and enlist for the war. And the old man agreed, with the provision that he’d hold the forged check and arrest Hal if he ever came back here. I took him to Toronto, and saw him into uniform, and said goodbye to him.”

“And it *was* goodbye, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. He was killed.”

“I hope the old man didn’t draw the forged check on him—when they brought the body back.”

“It was never brought back.”

“Left him over there, did they?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, his body was never found.”

“No?”

“No. He was killed in a trench that was captured by the Germans in one of their drives on Ypres. And when the trench was retaken, months later, no one knew where he’d been buried. I looked it all up when I was over there for Military Intelligence, in 1918. I thought Helen would want to know.”

“And didn’t she?”

“Oh yes, I suppose so. She didn’t say.”

“Why not?”

Woodbridge became interested in his cigarette. “She has never forgiven me for helping Hal to enlist.”

“How did he behave in the army?”

“Oh, he ate it up. He’d have been decorated if he hadn’t been snuffed out.”

“What was it? A shell?”

“No. He was struck in the head with a hand grenade.”

The headwaiter interrupted them. “You’re wanted on the telephone, Major.”

“Thanks. Just a minute, Billy. It’s probably Bob to say he’s found my notes.”

When Benedict returned with the keys, they were ready to leave. “Here’s something Bert wants you to look at,” Benedict said, giving Duff the shorthand notes of Mrs. Brewston’s letters to Woodbridge.

“All right.” Duff took them in one hand while he was holding out the other to Woodbridge. “Goodbye, Billy. See you later.” He turned to Benedict. “’Phone Bilkey and tell him to meet me at the office right away.”

He made no engagement to see Woodbridge again, because he was preparing a little plan that was designed to bring Woodbridge, in anxious haste, to call on him for help. And while Woodbridge was limping up the steps from the basement grill, Duff sat down again at the lunch table to glance through the specimens of Mrs. Brewston's secret correspondence.

His plan was simple enough. He had heard of Mrs. Brewston in connection with the relief work for devastated France that had become so fashionable after the war. She was the spirited young wife of a solid "sugar magnate". She had two daughters in their teens, a social position as distinguished as it was respectable, and an ambition, obviously, that would be anything but furthered by a scandal and a divorce. Her letters showed her engaged in a liaison with Woodbridge that must have begun in the happy atmosphere of victorious Paris when they had met there in 1918.

"Get on the trail of Mrs. Albert Brewston," Duff said to Bilkey, whom he found waiting for him in his office. "She may be away at her summer place, or she may be in town. I want you to get an interview with her, and it won't be easy. She probably has a private secretary you'll have to pass. Tell her you're from a man named Woodbridge if you can't break through in any other way."

"What then?"

Bilkey was an operative who had the manners of a confidence man.

"When you get her alone," Duff said, "you'll represent yourself as a police detective. You've been investigating a gang of blackmailers in town, trying to get evidence against them. In the course of your investigation, you've found Mrs. Brewston's name coupled with this man Woodbridge's in a note-book belonging to some member of the gang. You want to know whether she has been approached—whether she can give you any evidence to help you work up a case against the blackmailer.

"All I want to get to her is that a crooked gang has marked Woodbridge and her for blackmail. There's no chance of her making any trouble for you. She'll be scared stiff. Be as smooth as you can with her. I don't want to give her heart failure. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"All right. Go to it. And ask Benedict to come in here a minute."

He watched, with an appreciative twinkle, the air of class and fashion with which Bilkey carried himself out of the room. He turned to his correspondence. It was the curse of his life. He hated all this “paper work” as he called it.

“Yes, Major?” Benedict had entered.

Duff raised his eyes reluctantly from a letter. “I want you to send a wire in cipher to that man in Ottawa—what’s his name?—Campbell. You’ll find him in the files. He helped us on the Harrington case, you remember? Well. One of old Andrew Clements’ sons—a boy named Hal Clements—enlisted with the Canadian contingent from Toronto, during the winter of 1914-15. I want his record from the war department files in Ottawa. I want particularly the full description of him, height, weight, and all the rest of it, and especially any distinguishing marks he may have had, or physical peculiarities. Tell Campbell to wire that in cipher first and then mail the rest of the record. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right. Has Benny been around to-day?”

“No. Not yet.”

“See if you can reach him on the ’phone and tell him I want him to drop in here, right away.”

“Yes, sir.”

This “Benny”—whose name was Londoner—was less a detective than a stool pigeon, through whom Duff kept in touch with the gossip of the underworld and the news of crime that circulated in the dives and blind tigers and Bowery joints in which the crooks of the metropolis meet for social relaxation and the companionship of their fellow craftsmen. Londoner had been set to watch for ex-soldiers in these circles, as soon as Duff decided that ex-soldiers seemed indicated by the details of the Clements robbery; but all Londoner’s watching and listening had been in vain. The Clements robbery was as much a mystery to the profession as it was to the outsider.

There was a pawnbroker on Hudson Street who usually acted as a fence for army veterans of a criminal way of life, because his son had been in France with the expeditionary forces; the son, known as “Lefty” Anders, had sailed for England immediately after the Clements robbery; and

professional rumor whispered that he had boasted of having been on the inside of that notorious job. The rumor seemed verified to Londoner, and to Duff, when Benny found for sale in the pawnbroker's an old pierced diamond that looked as if it might have been part of a medieval necklace of unpolished stones belonging to Helen Clements. Such stones are rare, outside of museums. Duff had located "Lefty" Anders in London, and men were now watching him to see whether he would drop any more pierced diamonds as he went; but none had appeared, and it was possible that Anders had acquired the diamond from the man who had stolen it. It was equally possible that he had boasted of being one of the authors of the Clements robbery, as any unscrupulous artist will claim an anonymous masterpiece in order to advertise himself.

"You can't tell," Duff said. "Lefty may never have heard of that new slogan of the ad. men, 'Nothing but the truth.'"

It was not about Lefty Anders, however, that Duff wished to talk to Benny Londoner. It was about three Canadians, ex-soldiers, whom Londoner had seen, one night, at the Cosmopolis Cafe, on Broadway, among the high-class "cons" and wire-tappers and Central Office men who made the Cosmopolis their social centre when the Rosenthal murder drove them out of their 43rd Street resort. The Cosmopolis Hotel was managed by a Canadian, and many of his guests came from across the border, so it was natural that the three Canadians should be registered there. But the guests of the hotel did not often descend to the cafe in the basement, which was a Broadway resort; and, when they did appear on the leather settles around its panelled walls, they were far from being the type of these three. These were gentlemen of fortune, on a holiday from Montreal, and Broadway had no tricks that it could teach them.

One of them had a blunt and heavy nose of a peculiar shade of pale magenta, and this fascinated Londoner. The other two tried to persuade Benny, at first, that such a feature was the distinguishing mark of a "Nova Scotia blue-nose," but finally they admitted that it was a reconstructed nose, modelled by a face surgeon in a German hospital. They called their blue-nosed friend "English Artie" because he wore a monocle, having only one eye to assist with a lens, since the sight of the other had been destroyed by the trench bomb that had blown off his nose. He had not a word to say for himself; he was drinking heavily, and he seemed to be one of those who sink, sodden with alcohol, into deeper and deeper glooms of dignified silence as they drink.

His companions told his story for him. He had been struck in the face by a bomb in a German night attack; and when he came to himself again, he realized that the attack had been successful, that the Germans had taken the trench. His face being mutilated beyond recognition, he had conceived the brilliant idea of changing uniforms in the darkness with a dead German; and he had done that so successfully by morning that he was gathered up, apparently unconscious, by a stretcher squad and taken to a German field hospital. There it developed that he had aphasia from shell shock; he spoke in disconnected phrases, with great difficulty, unable to remember who he was or to explain what had become of his identification tag. When his face was healed, he remained as an orderly in the hospital, but his appearance was so repulsive that a surgeon was ordered to work on him. Here was the result.

The story delighted Benny; it had such alluring possibilities for a criminal whose photograph was in the Rogues' Gallery. He spoke of it with enthusiasm to Duff, and Duff replied: "You ought to read more, Benny. That dope about facial reconstruction for criminals was worked to a fare-you-well by the Sunday papers, long ago. Besides, how about finger prints?"

"That's so." Benny resigned himself. "You couldn't reconstruct your fingers. An' you couldn't do much business without 'em."

The story had meant nothing to Duff at the time, and it meant little enough now, except that, as he recalled it, he realized that the three Canadians must have been at the Cosmopolis about the time of the Clements robbery. They were ex-soldiers, and they were crooks. It was possible that they had been regimental friends of Hal Clements and that they had picked on the Clements home to loot, for what you might call sentimental reasons.

There was another possibility, but it was too melodramatically improbable for Duff to consider it. He kept it out of his mind and merely acted on it without admitting it to his consideration.

"Benny," he said, when the little Cockney arrived in his office, late that afternoon, "do you remember the blue-nosed soldier you saw one night in the Cosmopolis?"

Benny stood with his hands in the pockets of his tight trousers, his bowler hat on the back of his head, chewing gum with a meditative shrewdness. He nodded non-committally.

"I want to find out who he was and what became of him."

Duff's method as a detective was the method of a trapper rather than a hunter. His genius lay in the inventing of the traps. If one failed, he tried another, as patient as an angler changing his bait, sitting at his desk like Isaak Walton under a river-side tree, quiet and humorous and kindly. And in that manner, he heard—as placidly as a fat bronze—Bilkey's report on his interview with Mrs. Bert Brewston.

Bilkey was apologetic. It had taken him two days to procure his audience with her, and he was afraid that he had failed in it, because she received him, standing in her library, heard his story in silence and said only "I know nothing about it." True, she had turned pale. She had confronted him with a desperate composure that overdid the haughtiness of indifference. But she had not said anything from which anyone could tell how she was going to jump, as Bilkey put it. And in the midst of his apologies for intruding on her, she had walked to a bell button, pressed it to call a servant, and left him without a word.

Duff regarded Bilkey with one eyebrow raised, amusedly. "That'll be all right, I think," he said. "Yes. I think that'll be all right."

"Will it? Fine!" He rose, much relieved. "Anything else. Major?"

"Yes. You'd better keep away from me for a while. Report to Tiernan in Washington, right away, and stay on the job with him till I send word it's safe for you to come back. I expect I'll be asked to investigate this blackmailing."

"Oh, I see." Bilkey smiled knowingly.

"No, you don't see," Duff assured him, "but it doesn't matter what you don't see, so long as you aren't seen. On your way, now. They may be here any minute."

Bilkey fled, but no one arrived to report his interview with Mrs. Brewston till the following morning. Then Woodbridge sent his card into Duff from the outer office, and Duff smiled and kept him waiting. He wished Woodbridge to be nervous and impatient. And he had his wish.

"Hello, Billy," he said, when Woodbridge hurried in and then checked himself at sight of Duff, as if he had been at once driven and reluctant. "What has happened? You look as if you'd had a bad night."

He was grey in the face. He had cut himself, shaving. It was raining outside, and yet it was evident from the wetness of his waterproof and

the hat in his hand that he had walked, instead of taking a taxi, and walked without an umbrella. He cleared his throat, but he did not speak. He sat down in a chair by the desk, frowning. He looked at his hat and his stick for a moment and then dropped them on the floor. He got out his cigarette case. Duff moved the matches and an ash tray towards him, but he did not strike a light.

“What’s the matter?” Duff asked.

“I—I want some advice,” he said. And he said it in the hollow voice of the man who has received a blow.

“I’d be glad to give you more than advice.” Duff had taken on the air of a physician receiving a patient, his chin on his chest, bending on Woodbridge a deep regard under a professional and sympathetic forehead. “You look as if you needed *help*.”

Woodbridge swallowed painfully. “I do.”

“In what way?”

He studied his cigarette, turning it over and over in his fingers as if it were the problem that he was trying to solve. “I’ve got a woman into trouble,” he said huskily, “and I don’t know what to do.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“Well—blackmail.” He looked up at Duff with eyes that were as guilty as they were miserable.

“Good,” Duff assured him. “Blackmail’s in *my* line, certainly. Tell me about it.” And when Woodbridge hesitated, he added: “You don’t need to tell me her name if you don’t want to.”

Woodbridge threw his cigarette on the ash tray in the manner of a man casting aside his final scruple. “She’s a married woman. We’ve been friends for years. Yesterday, a detective came to her—”

“Just a minute,” Duff interrupted. “What sort of detective?”

“A police detective,” Woodbridge said in a voice that gave a sort of breathy shudder on the word “police.”

“How do you know he was a police detective?”

“He said so.”

“But that would be the last thing he’d tell you if he were really a detective. What did he look like?”

Woodbridge stared at him, dumbly. “I don’t know.”

“I see. What did he say?”

He jumped up as if the question had stung him. He limped two or three crippled strides across the room, turned, and came back and sat down again abruptly, as if both knees had failed him. “He said he’d been investigating some—some people—some blackmailers—and he’d found her name and mine written in a—in a note-book or something—and he wanted to know whether she could help him—whether they’d been trying to blackmail us—or something like that.”

“Why didn’t he come to you?”

“He said he didn’t know who I was. She’s a— Her name’s well known.” His voice failed him.

“Stuff, Billy.”

“What?”

Duff tilted back in his chair with a relieved smile and stretched elaborately. “You had me worried for a minute.”

“What’s the— What do you—?”

“He wasn’t a detective.”

“No?” It was the voice of a very weak, a very incredulous hope.

“No. He was probably a blackmailer.”

And at that, the hope that had begun slowly to fill Woodbridge with a faltering breath of relief, went out of him again in a long tremulous deflation and let him sink in on himself, collapsed.

“What did she say? Did she give herself away? Did she admit anything?”

Woodbridge wagged his head in a merely mechanical movement of negation—an automatic reply of which he seemed unconscious. His gaze was fixed gloomily on the certain prospect of disaster.

Duff rose and patted him on the shoulder. “Come out of it, Billy,” he said. “This is easy. I can handle it.”

“How?” His voice asked it but his eyes did not.

Duff began to walk cheerfully up and down the shabby carpet. “Well, they haven’t anything real, or they wouldn’t have come to her with *that* story. It sounds like one of Cleveland Dick’s little games. I’ll get after him and find out. Meantime, you two want to keep away from each other. If you have any letters from her—or anything like that—you’d better burn them.”

Woodbridge did not move. From somewhere behind the mask of his set stare, he replied “I have.”

“And tell her to do the same.”

He made a pale grimace of contemptuous despair. “It’s all off—between us. You don’t need to arrange that part of it.”

“You mean that when she saw herself threatened with exposure, she dropped you flat?”

He let his silence answer for him.

“Then I should think you were well out of it.”

His lips writhed in silent sarcasm.

“No doubt.”

Duff sat down. His trap had worked.

Woodbridge went into his pocket for his cigarette case again; and this time he struck a light and inhaled a deep consoling breath of nicotine. He blew it out, at his feet, leaning forward with a heavy scowl.

Duff asked: “Did Hal Clements speak German?”

Woodbridge looked up, under his eyebrows, without raising his head.

“Did your friend Hal Clements speak German?”

“Yes. What has that to do—?”

“Did he speak it fluently?”

“Yes. His mother took him abroad for a year—to some German university. Why?” He mumbled it indifferently, with his depressed and sulky scowl.

“Because I don’t think he was killed in the war,” Duff said coolly. “I suspect that he was taken prisoner and he’s still alive.”

Woodbridge sat up as suddenly as if his silent worry were a bad dream from which Duff had wakened him. He even blinked stupidly, like a man roused from sleep. “Still *alive!*”

“Yes. I’ve been getting his record from the files in Canada, and it’s incomplete. Several details are missing. He must have removed them himself—or got someone else to do it—since the war ended.”

“I don’t—I don’t understand.”

“No. Well, my guess is that there was something in his father’s safe that he wanted to get hold of, so he engineered this robbery. He needed money, of course. The job yielded several thousand dollars in cash, besides the jewelry and so forth, but what he really wanted was in the safe. Papers of some sort. Have you any idea what it could be?”

“Wait a minute.” Woodbridge was bewildered. “What are you talking about?” He laid down his cigarette and rubbed his forehead as if he had a headache. “Do you say Hal wasn’t killed?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it to anyone but you.” He was drawing on a scratch pad an intricate design of squares and circles while he talked. “Because I can’t prove it. It’s mostly guess work. I believe he had his face blown off in that night attack. When he found himself wounded, in the hands of the Germans, he stripped the uniform off a dead German and got himself taken to a German hospital, suffering from shell shock and unable to give any account of himself. They rebuilt his face for him and he remained as an orderly in the hospital till the war ended. Then, what was he to do? His father didn’t want him back here—threatened, in fact, to put him in jail if he ever returned. And he was a weird-looking thing with a false nose and one eye blind, so he didn’t care to face his sister or his old friends. Besides, in making his way out of Germany, he fell in with a gang of crooks, and he had a fine, rowdy, drunken, adventurous time with them—in London, say. Then he arrives in Montreal, where he’s some sort of card-sharp or con man or bootlegger maybe—under the name of ‘English Artie’—and he’s afraid, perhaps, that if he’s ever picked up by the police and identified, someone may accidentally stumble on the fact that those descriptions are Hal Clements’ in the army files in Ottawa. So he finds some way to get hold of these identification items and destroys them.

“Then, he comes to New York, on a bat, with two of his criminal friends, and he needs money. He’s decided to get married and buy a ranch, and settle down. Also he wants to get hold of something that’s in his father’s safe. So, he burglarizes the house, gets what he wants out of the safe, and beats it back to Canada. He may have taken a local man in on the job here, to dispose of some of the jewelry. I’m not sure of that. Anyway, back in

Montreal, he marries a French-Canadian girl and starts out for Calgary. And that's as far as I've followed him."

Woodbridge had listened in silent amazement. "Do you mean to say that this is all true?—that you can prove it?"

"No! Heavens, no! It's all pure guesswork. I can't prove a word of it—*yet*. That's why I'm telling it to you. I need your help."

"I don't—"

"Well, listen. I'm sure that Helen Clements won't want me to go ahead and follow this up if it means that her father is going to haul her brother back here and run him into jail. What would be the sense of that? The boy has evidently decided to straighten up. And I don't know how to handle the old man. I can't do anything officially, you understand, except pursue this poor mutilated sap and soak him. If I tell the old man about it, he may order me to go ahead, and I'll have to do it. I want her to know what the situation is. And I want *you* to tell her, because she may be afraid of me. She may not trust me. I want you to see her and help her to decide what to do. Then, with her permission, you can tell me as much or as little as you think it's safe to tell me, understand?"

Woodbridge objected feebly. "I don't see—"

"Well, suppose she happens to know that her brother's still alive. Suppose she knows what was in that safe, and sympathizes with his determination to get it. Suppose she was away from home, that night, purposely—"

"Great Scott!"

"Yes. All of that. Do you understand, now, why I don't want to go to her with a theory that will be like giving her the third degree?"

Woodbridge looked, for the moment, as if Mrs. Brewston and the blackmail had really slipped out of his mind in his excitement about Hal Clements' resurrection from the dead. "All right," he said. "I'll do what I can."

"That's the way to talk," Duff encouraged him.

Woodbridge put on his hat as if it were his resolution and grasped his stick determinedly. "Goodbye. I'll phone you."

"Thanks."

Duff sank his hands in his pockets and began to rock in his swivel chair, backward and forward, in a state of deep, excited satisfaction. He was as elated as a playwright who believes that he has written and rehearsed an imaginative masterpiece, but he was as nervous as that playwright when the final rehearsal has been dismissed and there is nothing left to do but to wait for the curtain to rise on the performance.

He was saying to himself, like Thackeray: "That's genius, my boy! That's genius!" He was delighted with his romance about Hal Clements. It accounted for everything in the robbery that was puzzling. It explained why the gang had been so disciplined; they were ex-soldiers. And how they came to be so evidently familiar with the plan of the house and the possibilities of the picture gallery: they were led by a son of the family. And why old Andrew Clements had been picked out for special indignities: the boy hated him. And why the safe had been so stripped of valueless and private papers: the boy wanted something that was among them. And why there was no trace or gossip of the gang among the fraternity in New York: they were Canadians, and having pawned one jewel, perhaps, to supply some immediate necessity, they vanished at once across the border.

Yes, as an imaginative invention, it looked like a masterpiece. But how would it play? Suppose that the police had already caught some common second story man who was about to confess that he had planned and executed the Clements robbery! Or suppose that the Clements family had, long since, privately received an account of Hal's death and burial from some friend in the Canadian contingent! Or suppose that Helen Clements laughed at the whole story, and told Andrew Clements about it, and Andrew Clements said: "You've missed your vocation, Duff. You're not a detective. You're a dime novelist." Suppose! Suppose!

Nothing of the sort occurred. Quite the opposite. Helen Clements swallowed the story whole. She came at once to Duff, with Woodbridge, to consult about how to manage her father; and she added a new link to the chain of circumstantiality that made the story possible. Hal Clements, as a boy, had stolen money from his father's writing desk; a detective had laid a trap for him and he had betrayed himself through his finger prints. Those prints his father had kept, and when the forged check appeared, years later, the smudge of an ink-stained thumb on the back of the check identified Hal as the drawer of it when he had carefully provided against being traced in any other way. All this evidence against him was in the looted safe, and he would naturally seek to destroy it, if only in the same

spirit of mischievous defiance that had moved him to have his father gagged and tied to the bed-post, ridiculously, instead of locked up with the servants in the picture gallery.

And now Duff found himself in an embarrassing situation. He had invented a fable which his public accepted as true. Helen Clements not only demanded that Hal's resurrection should be kept from her father; she asked that Duff put her secretly in touch with Hal and let her send him money.

"I'll have to find him first," Duff said uneasily. "And you must remember that this whole thing's a theory. I'm not convinced that 'English Artie' is your brother. Not by any means."

"Find him," she insisted, "and let me have a look at him. It wouldn't matter how he's changed. I'd know him even by his walk."

"So would I," said Woodbridge. "And I'll run out to Calgary, any time, if you can locate him there."

The look that Helen Clements exchanged with him was something more than friendly. "We might make up a party for a trip to Banff," she said, "and go together."

Duff regarded cynically the young man who, a few days before, in that same chair, had sat wallowing in the depths of depression because all was over between him and Mrs. Brewston. "I'll do my best," he promised. "I have a man up there, searching for him. I'll let you know."

She rose to hold out her hand. "Your best," she said, "amounts to the miraculous."

He watched them go out together, and he watched them with no feeling of triumph in the thought that he had rescued Woodbridge from an unhappy love affair and thrown him into the arms of a waiting heiress. It meant little to Duff that he had apparently assisted in a very striking bit of sentimental drama. He remained indifferent to it, with his whole thought fixed, coldly, on the end that he had been pursuing when he forced Woodbridge into the path of felicity. Duff had still to win his way with Andrew Clements by producing an impressive and ingenious solution of the Clements robbery. That was all that interested Duff. The rest was nothing.

And here he was—after how many weeks—with how many operatives hot on the trail in spite of the most elaborate plants and the busiest finessing; here he was with nothing to show for his time and his expense but this absurd story about a man with a blue nose risen from the dead! Outside of

that, nothing! Nothing but a pierced diamond in a pawnshop and a suspected man on the streets of London.

He could hardly go to Clements and say: “See how clever I am! I’ve had a second operative in your house for weeks and you’ve never suspected it. I’ve communicated with him through a newsboy, every morning, and you’ve none of you noticed it. I’ve got Woodbridge out of the clutches of a married woman with whom he was in love, and given him back to your daughter, who begins to look as if she were going to marry him. And in addition to all that, I’ve invented a completely wonderful story of how your son Hal rose from the dead, with a blue nose, in order to tie you to a bed-post and rifle your safe. Admire me. I’m a genius.”

No. Duff could hardly offer that account of his activities to Clements, and yet it was the only truthful report that he could make. For three days, in the midst of his other troubles, he worried about Clements intermittently; and he was as far as ever from deciding which way to move when a wire from Benny Londoner, in Montreal, was laid on his desk.

Benny reported that “English Artie” and his bride had been killed, a month previous, in a railroad collision near Medicine Hat, on their way to Calgary.

Duff read it, and re-read it, and read it again. At the first reading, he said to himself; “That settles the girl. I can’t turn up her brother for her, anyway.” On the second consideration, he looked startled. “Well,” he thought, “if I can’t prove my story about a blue-nosed burglar, this fixes it so that it can’t be so easily *disproved* either.” And, after the third reading, he said: “If I told the old man the story now, he couldn’t order me to arrest his son. There’s that much gained.” And he began slowly to grin, and finally to chuckle.

He snapped his fingers and caught up his office phone. “Bob,” he ordered his office manager, “get me an appointment to see Mr. Clements—to-night, if possible—at his home. Yes. Tell him it’s important—an important development that I must consult him about. Yes.”

He rose with a sort of giggle and began to pace and wheel about the room. “It’s a wow!” he told himself. “And yet it’s all I have to offer him. If I can get through it with my face straight, he may fall for it—the same as his daughter did. I don’t know; it must have something probable in it or she would have given me the laugh, wouldn’t she? I’ll do it. I’ll go the limit. I might as well be ridiculous as the way I *am*!”

And he went the limit.

As soon as he got word that he might see Clements, after dinner that evening, at nine o'clock, he sent a 'phone message to Woodbridge asking him to meet him at the Clements home at nine-thirty, with Helen Clements. "If I can't do it in half an hour," he told himself, "I'm licked." And it was in this mood of gay desperation that he was ushered into the Clements library, at nine sharp, to find the formidable "old Andy" playing solitaire at a folding card-table, with a reading light at his elbow shining hard on the furrows of his sharp old face.

"What is it?" Clements asked, without looking up from his game.

"Well, Mr. Clements," Duff said, in a slow drawl, "I have to have a decision from you before I can go any further with this case. It's just faintly possible that the man at the bottom of it was a young fellow who was supposedly killed in the war."

Clements played an ace. "Who was *that*?"

"Your son Hal."

Clements did not so much as flick an eyelash. He studied his cards composedly. "Sit down," he said. "What makes you think so?"

Duff sat down, feeling a trifle flat. The old man, bald and red, but immaculately dressed in dinner clothes, continued with his "Canfield." Duff plunged into his story—or rather into his theory—of Hal Clements and the robbery; and Clements heard him in complete silence. He asked only one question. When Duff described the record against Hal Clements that was locked in his father's private safe, Clements inquired: "How did you learn that?" Duff replied: "By a piece of trickery. It would take too long to tell you."

"Quite so," Clements said drily. "Go on."

Duff went on. He went on, uninterrupted, to the end—which was Londoner's wire about the death of "English Artie" and his wife. "Now," he asked, "do you want me to continue this investigation?—to arrest his confederates, if we can trace them—which is doubtful—and to recover whatever may be left of the jewelry by the time we catch them? Or do you think, as I do, that it will not be worth the expense?"

Clements had gathered up his cards. He busied himself shuffling them for a new game, bent over them thoughtfully, with his eyes on his shrunken

and corded hands. "All you have," he said, "is a theory—a very brilliant theory but nothing more."

"Nothing," Duff agreed, "*as yet.*"

"The more brilliant," Clements purred, "because you haven't a fact to go on." He was laying out a new game. "A very brilliant theory," he said. "Very clever. And I think," he added mildly, "quite correct."

For a moment Duff believed that he had misunderstood that "quite correct." Did the man mean—?

"There was no light in my bedroom when they attacked me," Clements went on, as he played, "but there was a light in the hall. I watched them when they went out the door. They had handkerchiefs tied over the lower part of the face, but the general physique of one of the men seemed familiar to me. Knowing that this unfortunate boy had been killed in France, I supposed that I was mistaken. You will go no further with the case."

If Duff had been a fraudulent spiritualist who suddenly found that a real ghost had materialized in his sham seance, he could not have been more dumbfounded.

"Do any of your men know of this theory?"

Duff succeeded in saying "No" in a natural voice.

"You haven't spoken of it to anyone?"

"It was only a theory. I—"

"You will keep it to yourself."

"Of course." He glanced at his watch, as a man will when a situation becomes so improbable that he seeks mechanically for some assurance that the event of time, at least, is still stable.

"That's all," Clements said. "Good night."

Duff got up slowly. He looked at Clements as if he half suspected that the old man was playing some ghastly joke on him.

And Clements, still interested in his game, said in the same abstracted and indifferent tone: "You might give me a report, if you will, on this young man, William Woodbridge. I judge that my daughter intends to marry him."

"Very well," Duff said steadily. "Good night."

And neither Woodbridge nor Helen Clements could understand his manner when he came out of the library and found them waiting for him in the room across the hall. "The case is closed," he said, in a thick, uncertain voice, and handed them Londoner's telegram.

He was, in fact, struggling with an almost hysterical amusement and elation, and this frightened him. "I must be losing my grip," he thought. "I'm growing childish."



Their heads were together over the telegram. They were silent. "You'll say nothing of this to your father," Duff warned the girl.

Their two heads were together over the telegram. They were silent.

“You’ll say nothing about this to your father,” he warned her. “There’s no use raking up old scores.”

She looked at Woodbridge with eyes that were moist with pity. “Poor Hal!” she said.

He put an arm behind her, and Duff left them there.

The queer thing about the whole case,” Duff explains, “is this: Andrew Clements must have had his son Hal in his mind from the first, and I must have got it from him in some sort of flash, without ever knowing that I had it. That’s why I fastened on Woodbridge the way I did, I’ll bet. It’s as if I knew Woodbridge could put me wise if I could only reach him. Then I turned right from Woodbridge to the girl, as if I knew that Hal was in between them somewhere, and I used Hal to bring them together again. If I believed in ‘spirit control,’ I’d think the boy had been directing me. Anyway, I’ll bet there was some sort of thought transference, eh? Don’t you think so? I did the right thing, all along, without knowing it. And when I made up the story that explained the whole case, I thought it was a joke. I tell you the human mind’s a funny thing. The more I see of myself, the more I’m sure of *that*.”

He says it with his usual twinkling smile, but the truth is that the Clements case is an excellent example of how Duff works—if nothing more—and, as such, it seemed worthy of being recorded, whether or not there was anything occult and mystical about it.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this eBook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Man With the Blue Nose* by Harvey J. O'Higgins]