

[COMPLETE STORY.]

A TRIANGLE OF THIEVES

I

By Marvyn Dana

THE four made their respective livings by chicanery. Each had loved two things always—gold and himself. Conversely, each hated toil and indigence. Of late their love had come to include a third object—a girl. Their hate had likewise expanded to include one another. This was the joint work of Marie and jealousy.

Marie was the daughter of the woman whose cafe they frequented. It was in the heart of the Tenderloin and therefore in the midst of their activities. At the same time, the clientele was very small and comparatively honest, so that the four were here isolated and free to discuss plans and plots without danger of interruption.

It was, too, a very pleasant place for loafing, and this was its greatest advantage for men who had no home and did not care to be on view too constantly in more public places. Most of all Marie, the cashier, was a magnet that drew and held them. She was only twenty, lithe, dainty, with true French vivacity and intelligence, and lovely as an American girl.

Each of the four had proposed innumerable times, to be refused as often. But, too, each was confident that Marie would at once accept him when he could display to her avaricious eyes a bulk of money adequate for matrimony. Unhappily, since they had frequented the cafe times had been rather bad with them at the races, the gambling rooms, and elsewhere in the attempted amassing of wealth.

Each was agog with a desire to "pull off" something good, something worthy of Marie. And each was suspicious lest another might have this happy chance before himself. Thus they grew morbid, and jealousy changed them from friends to enemies. Marie took their money and smiled on all.

Then one night "Skinny," who was also known as "Bones" and "the Shadow," on account of his height and lankness, astonished and enraged his three companions by an announcement. "I'm goin' up to Connecticut," he said easily, "to bury my father an' git my inheritance."

"Oh, come off!" exclaimed "Pumpy"—thus termed for his enthusiastic method of shaking hands. "You always was a liar."

This was undoubtedly true. Skinny was also a braggart and a humorist. Indeed, his sense of fun found satisfaction in the chagrin of his listeners, for he grinned as he continued.

"Ten thousand plunks in cash! What do you think of that? Two thousand in cash in the bank and another eight thousand waitin' to be paid fer the farm if I'll take it! What?"

"You're stingin' us agin," cried "Teeters" in great disgust. "I'm goin' to bed."

Teeters, who was the fat member of the quartette, rose and walked out. Skinny called after him:

"It's straight. Come back a minute, Teeters." And as the other returned sulkily, he continued: "I'm leavin' in the mornin', an' I won't be here agin fer a week. When I do, I'll have the plunks, and can show 'em to ye. I'd show ye the lawyer's letter, but I don't want your sort to know the place, seein' as how I might want to retire there an' be respectable hynchey."

The others glared in silence for a moment; then "Sneezes" spoke softly. Sneezes always spoke softly, and always coughed gently before and after every sentence. To his consumptive manner he owed his nicknames of "Sneezes," "One Lump," and "Barker," but whether his lungs were really affected or only his manner none knew, not even himself, for he was a thorough-paced hypocrite to himself and all the world. So now he merely coughed mildly and almost whispered:

"I'm glad for you, my boy, if it's true. But you know, Skinny, you always did lie, and I guess you're lying now."

Skinny laughed aloud, for by Sneezes' words he knew that his story was believed. He plotted over his crest-fallen companions for a moment, then rose awkwardly and slouched off.

"See yer in a week, boys," he called over his shoulder.

He paused at the cashier's desk and whispered to Marie. The girl shook her head violently, whereat the watching three at the table were relieved for the moment.

As Skinny passed out, still chuckling, Teeters expressed the conviction of all: "He hain't told her yet!"

II.

A week later, ten o'clock in the evening. Teeters, Pumpy and Barker were sitting in the cafe ogling Marie and scowling at one another, when Skinny entered. He was evidently in the best of spirits, whereat his associates scowled the harder, no longer at one another, but with one accord at him. He paused for a whispered word to Marie, then slouched up to the table at which the three were sitting.

"Hello, boys!" he said clamorously. "I'm back, an' safe an' sound."

Pumpy and Teeters shook hands limply as Skinny seated himself, with a stereotyped greeting.

"Why, how nice and spruce you look, Skinny!" remarked Sneezes. "And such fine new clothes! And did you sell the farm, Skinny?"

"Yes," Skinny replied with great gusto; "you can bet yer life I sold it! Got the dough, too, all right, all right. What?"

Teeters snorted contemptuously and started to speak. He was interrupted, however, by Pumpy, who regarded Skinny with manifest disgust.

"I'd be ashamed," he ejaculated. "Ashamed o' what?" Skinny inquired indignantly.

"Ashamed o' buryin' a poor ole father an' then comin' a-grinnin' over it. Yes, sir, I'd be ashamed. You're a loss, Skinny."

This was Pumpy's most abusive phrase, for he invariably lost on the races all that he acquired elsewhere, and in consequence regarded all horses with aversion.

Skinny's face grew serious. "I wasn't mentionin' any reflections on the funeral," he said apologetically. "I'm respectin' my father O.K., an' don't any of you guys foug it. I wish the old man had ten thousand dollars this minute an' was alive to enjoy himself. He was a good father an' a damned sight better'n I ever deserved. Don't any of you galoots git frisky 'bout my family affairs, fer I won't stand fer it! See?"

Then the frown passed from his brows, and he continued banteringly: "Cept, o' course, 'bout the money. I don't mind yer jokin' me a little jest because I'm full o' dough. It'll kind o' help break me in to feelin' like the other bloated plutocrats if you sort o' chew the rag concernin' my swag. You see, ten thousand beautiful plunks is new to me.

"Make me buy drinks. Try to do me, so's I'll sympathise with my pals, the millionaires. What?"

"You hain't got no money," Teeters declared apologetically. "I ain't swallowin' pipe dreams. You always was a liar, Skinny."

Skinny beamed on the angry man and replied:

"That's it, Teeters, get the steam up. It tips me off on how nice it is to be rich, when I see you showin' how hard it is to be poor. I'm gittin' used to it, havin' unlimited coin for a considerable spell. But I can imagine just how you feel, Teeters. Do it some more, old socks."

Teeters grew purple.

"Nobody has seen you a-flashin' any particular wad. Keep it in banks, don't ye? Got safe deposit boxes, hain't ye? Didn't I say you was a liar? I did, and you are!"

Teeters raised his voice so that Marie at her desk could hear him.

"You ain't got no money, Skinny. We're on to you, Skinny. Call it off! D'ye hear? You make me sick!"

Skinny had listened with a smile of amused tolerance. He now spoke cheerfully:

"You do me a heap of good, Teeters, an' that's no fake! I've a good mind jest to make you madder to show—"

He broke off and sat in deep thought. Finally, he thrust a hand into his breast pocket and slowly drew forth a long black pocket-book, which he opened with great solemnity and revealed a thick stack of bills. The outer one was for five hundred dollars.

His irritated pals leaned forward. Sneezes coughed delicately, while Pumpy trembled and Teeter's brow was beaded with perspiration. They were experts in the consideration of cash. This was genuine money. An audible sigh went up from the three.

Suddenly Skinny shut the book and returned it to his pocket.

III.

The three withdrew in rage and despair, leaving Skinny in possession of the field. Outside, they separated, and each went his way alone. Evidently it would be useless at this time to dispute Skinny's triumph. He had the money, and to have the money was equivalent to having the girl, in the opinion of the three.

Without the money they were powerless to interrupt the career of their victorious rival. Marie had refused them penniless too often to leave any hope that it was in their means to win her without a golden lure. And Skinny had that lure! Ten thousand dollars! It was more than any one of the three had ever possessed.

They regarded Skinny with a certain awe as the owner of such wealth, and hated him with the virulent hate born of envy. It was strange that never before had he boasted of the money which might be his one day. However, this very reticence made the fact more appalling from the shock of surprise.

Skinny had the money—he would have Marie. It was a frightful situation, and the three cursed Skinny's

fate and their own with savage intensity.

Meantime, Skinny himself was closeted with Marie's mother in a rear room of the cafe, where once again the black pocket-book was displayed. Moreover, the first bill was stripped from the pile and passed over to Madame, after which some legal-looking documents were signed.

Finally Skinny, on his way out at a late hour, when the cafe was deserted, conversed at length with Marie, and in parting kissed her. Then Skinny strode forth smiling, as might be expected of one who has fallen heir to a fortune and gained a sweetheart.

It was late when Skinny at last tumbled into bed. He fell asleep almost instantly. A little later he was awakened through some subtle instinct, for no noise had disturbed him.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright in bed and listened alertly. There was no sound except the distant rumbling of the traffic, yet he did not relax his attention. It was perhaps five minutes before anything happened to justify his vigilance. Then he detected a slight creaking on the stairway.

Instantly Skinny slipped out of bed and took up a strategic position behind a sofa that stood against the wall near the door.

From this point of vantage he was able both to hear and to see, as a faint light came in from the street and gave sufficient illumination for one familiar with the room. Skinny was now convinced that his instinct had not played him false, for the creaking on the stair continued. And the noise was of a most suspicious character.

In this fourth-rate boarding-house, where Skinny maintained his inexpensive domicile, noises in the halls were not of rare occurrence, for dilatory bonders were wont to return late and somnolently. But this sound was quite different. It was stealthy and significant of treachery, as of the crafty approach of one who sought to do evil undetected. Skinny crouched behind

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