

Chapter 5: Good-bys and Alibis

MARIE, Eve's maid, was busy straightening up the reception room when she heard a loud knock at the front door.

She opened it to admit a distinguished-looking gentleman wearing evening clothes, who announced himself as Mr. Satan. He wished to see Eve at once.

Marie endeavored to conceal her embarrassment. She had never met His Satanic Majesty before, and had pictured him as a very terrifying person indeed, with cloven hoofs, and horns. Instead, she found him quite young and handsome, although it seemed to her, not in a very good humor.

Eve, who had been taking a bath, slipped on a *negligée* figleaf and hurried to the hall.

"Pardon my rather sketchy appéarance," she said, giving Satan a triangular look. "This

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makes me think of old times. But you were much nicer when we first met. Why the sulphurous glances? Is anything wrong?"

"Yes," Satan remarked curtly. "When I gave my consent to the formation of your club I expressly stipulated that visitors were not to be allowed. Yet I am informed by Police Headquarters that you had a man in here the other night."

"Don't be absurd." Eve turned up her nose. "We didn't invite him——"

"Whether you invited him or not is beside the point. He was here. And naturally, he talked. The newspapers have gotten hold of the matter and are bothering the life out of me. As for the reform crowd, they insist that your club is a nuisance and ought to be suppressed."

"I didn't suppose you'd pay any attention to such things."

"I have to. It's bad enough, trying to keep those damned Russian Reds and the rest of the radical bunch in order, without you and your friends adding to my difficulties. The only way to maintain discipline in a place like this is to keep every sinner convinced that he really has

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sinned. You can't expect a man to burn gracefully for having been untrue to his wife, for instance, if some busybody comes along and tells him that monogamy is only a convention and doesn't mean anything."

"But we haven't made any of our discussions public."

"They're leaking out. You'll have to be more careful. Hell is nothing if not respectable. It has got to be run on old-fashioned, conservative lines. I simply cannot have the whole place upset just because you and your crowd have gone in for a lot of new-fangled modern ideas."

Eve began to laugh.

"Now that you have gotten *that* out of your system," she said, "I may as well tell you that the man in question was only our old friend Don Juan, trying to seduce my French maid."

"Oh." Satan seemed relieved. "Has the girl been encouraging him?"

"No. She's rather pretty, which is all the encouragement the Don ever needs. A very modest young person. I don't see why she was sent here in the first place."

Satan drew a notebook from his pocket.

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"That reminds me," he said, "Adam asked me, the other night, to look up her case."

"Adam? Well—I like that." Eve seemed a bit disturbed. "Anyone might suppose, at his time of life——"

"Don't be worried. His interest wasn't personal. In spite of the moral turpitude which has been heaped upon him I find your husband a very decent sort. H-m—let me see—number 863,749,518—26—A—4—the usual thing—love without a marriage certificate—other party involved an American aviator—heroically shot down in the service of his country—awarded gold-plated halo, third class, with wings and harp, in addition to his *Croix de Guerre*."

"While the girl is given the gate. Is that fair?"

"Don't blame me. I didn't make the rules."

"You know how I feel about the double standard. The man was just as guilty as she was. Why not have her exchanged? There are plenty of undesirable citizens in Heaven, I hear, who would be better off down here among their friends."

"There you go again," Satan fumed. "Pre-



"Hell is nothing if not respectable," stormed Satan. "I am informed by Police Headquarters that you had a man in here the other night."

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cisely what I'm complaining of. You sympathize with this girl. What happens? She becomes dissatisfied, of course. The first thing you know she'll have the impertinence to question God. If you really want to be kind to the creature why not send her to hear some good, old-fashioned sermons with plenty of fire and brimstone in them? There is an excellent man down at the Lost Souls Tabernacle who is doing great work among the damned——”

“Oh—piffle! You know as well as I do that the girl has been very unjustly treated.”

“My dear Eve. You talk as though I had invented Hell, instead of merely having been selected to run it. A thankless job, at best. If I were to make an exception in this girl's case, I'd be swamped with complaints before morning. It's out of the question, my dear. She'll stay here until the place freezes over, so far as I am concerned. Take my advice and stop upsetting these poor creatures' minds!” He stalked out without even saying good night, and Eve, very much annoyed, went upstairs to finish dressing.

When she came down again the members of

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the club were already in their places. Mrs. Potiphar, the speaker of the evening, was glancing nervously at her notes.

"I have suggested 'alibis' as the subject for my little talk to-night," she said, when the meeting had come to order, "because of the very unfortunate way in which my name has been connected with that of my husband's overseer, Joseph. You all know the story, I suppose."

"He claimed, didn't he," laughed Salome, lighting a cigarette, "that you tried to vamp him, but he remained the perfect Sir Galahad and would have none of you, gadzooks?"

"Exactly! Fancy being placed in such a position! To have my friends think I made advances to the fellow and was turned down! Why—it's a reflection on my reputation as a lady! I have never been turned down by anyone, if I do say it myself! The very idea! Joseph fixed up that story to make character with Captain Potiphar, and get his salary raised!"

"When it comes to lying about their love affairs," Phryne murmured, a gleam of amusement in her eyes, "it is my experience that

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most men could make Ananias look like the editor of a true story magazine.”

“Perfectly right, my dear,” Mrs. Potiphar went on. “My husband had a terrible reputation—among his friends at the club, at least. At home he sang a very different tune. All I can say is, it would be a good thing if some of these verbal Romeos were required to live up to their reputations. They wouldn’t indulge in so much loose conversation.

“But to come back to my story. Mr. Potiphar took a great interest in politics, and helped the government a lot in the Memphis elections. So Pharaoh sent for him to come to the palace.

“‘You are a good scout, Potiphar, old man!’ Pharaoh said, ‘and what can I do to show my appreciation of your work for the party?’

“Mr. Potiphar replied that he would like to be on the governor’s staff. The sterner side of military life had always appealed to him, he said.

“‘I will take this job at a dollar a year,’ he told Pharaoh, ‘to prove that I am a regular patriot and when it comes to serving my country I do not count the cost.’ So Pharaoh made him

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a captain in the Memphis Mounted Marines, which was the governor's private bodyguard, and led all the parades.

"That gave Mr. Potiphar a chance to travel a lot, running about the country on what he called official business. And of course he had to get somebody to look after the farm while he was away. So Joseph, who was a smart Jewish boy and knew his vegetables, was made head overseer. Mr. Potiphar picked him up one day at a bargain sale in the slave market.

"I never saw much of him, having affairs of my own to attend to. There was a big date and fig man from Damascus—I think I mentioned him before—who made Memphis four or five times a year, and always gave some hectic parties whenever he came to town. And I had met the most charming young artist, an interior decorator, who specialized in boudoir work and was making plans to do mine over in the new Mongolian style, black and red, you know, with inlaid teakwood. A real artist in every way. His conceptions were magnificent, even though he was never quite able to carry them out."

"All artists are like that," remarked Phryne

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with a laugh. "There was my friend Praxiteles—the famous Greek sculptor, you know. I posed for him a lot. I never met a man with such a superb imagination. If only he could have measured up to it. Still, one learns to overlook such little shortcomings."

"I suppose one must," Mrs. Potiphar murmured. "So far as my interior decorator was concerned, he fitted in very well, as a passing diversion. He used to stop by almost every afternoon, when Captain Potiphar was away.

"One day we were sitting in my boudoir discussing early Chinese bronzes and such things over a pitcher of home-brew when I happened to look out of the window and to my surprise saw my friend from Damascus just driving up to the door in a public chariot. I had no idea he was in town and for a moment I did not know what to do.

"My decorator friend noticed that I was upset.

"'What is the matter, sweetheart?' he asked. 'Has anything happened?'

"'Not yet,' I said, 'but it is likely to very soon. My husband is at the door.'

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“When my decorator friend heard that he reached for his hat.”

“‘What,’ he said, ‘is the quickest way out?’”

“‘The back way,’ I told him, ‘but I cannot let you take it, for fear the servants might talk. So the best thing for you to do is to go down to the cellar and hide in the vegetable bin until I send you word that the coast is clear.’”

“I had just time to show him the way to the cellar stairs, and hide the pitcher and glasses, and powder my nose, when my friend from Damascus knocked at the door. He had been delayed for a few moments by an argument with the chariot driver.

“‘Hello, darling,’ I said. ‘Pardon my appearance but I have been busy with a little interior decorating and have not had time to get dressed. When did you arrive in our well-known city?’”

“‘Just a few moments ago,’ he told me, ‘and as I heard at the hotel that the governor and his staff were unveiling a couple of new obelisks out at the Pyramids I thought I would take a chance and bring you this jug of your favorite Damascus extra-dry. So if you can produce a

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little ice and some glasses we will have a party.' ”

“You certainly had your hands full,” laughed Thais.

“Well, I wasn't worried. I knew my interior decorator, being cursed with the artistic temperament and therefore rather shy, would stay where he was until I sent him word to come out. As for Captain Potiphar, whenever he and the governor started one of their unveiling parties they usually made it an excuse to unveil everything in sight. So my friend from Damascus and I had a very pleasant time.

“But I admit I *was* rather surprised when I heard the sound of wheels about six o'clock and looked out of the window to see Captain Potiphar driving up in his new Senegambian Sedan. In fact, I almost fainted.

“You can realize my position, of course. In the first place, I had to alibi myself with Mr. Potiphar, on account of my friend from Damascus. And in the second place, I had to keep them both in the dark, so far as my interior decorator in the vegetable bin was concerned. You will admit that it took some quick thinking.”

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"If you saved *that* situation without any deaths in the family," observed Queen Scheherazade, "you deserved a Carnegie medal."

"I do not wish to appear conceited," Mrs. Potiphar replied, with a pleased smile, "but I think I handled matters very nicely."

"To begin with, I pushed my Damascus friend to the door."

" 'My husband is outside,' I said, 'and if he finds you here I cannot answer for the consequences. Stand in the front hall and as soon as he comes in wave your sword around as though you wanted to kill somebody and at the same time call me all the names you can think of. Forget that I am your sweetheart for a moment and act as though I were only your wife. Then go, and be sure to slam the door to after you.'"

" 'But why?' he asked.

" 'Never mind about the details,' I said, leading him into the hall. 'Just do as I tell you.'"

"He did, carrying on like a lunatic and frightening poor Captain Potiphar half out of his wits. I never heard anyone use such dreadful language.

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“When he had gone, Captain Potiphar crawled from under the dining-room table.”

“‘Do not be afraid, darling,’ he said, ‘for I am here to protect you. What was all the excitement about?’

“‘Thank Heaven you have come,’ I cried, falling on his neck, ‘and if you had been five minutes later I do not know what might have happened to me. That wretched creature who just left here chased a poor young boy into the house a few moments ago and threatened to kill him.’

“‘I do not know what their quarrel was about, but I could see the man had been drinking. So what with that, and my being so tender-hearted I could not hurt a fly, to say nothing of not wishing to see blood shed all over our new parlor furniture, I told the young man to go down in the cellar and hide in the vegetable bin.’

“‘That certainly showed great presence of mind on your part, my dear,’ Mr. Potiphar said, ‘and you are a noble woman.’

“‘It is a good thing you came when you did,’ I told him, ‘or I might have been killed trying

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to save this poor young man's life. So now that you know the truth please run down to the cellar and let him out of the vegetable bin before he gets smothered in onions.'

"Mr. Potiphar did as I told him. My decorator friend was so frightened he was speechless, which under the circumstances was perhaps just as well.

"'If there's anything I can do for you, young man,' Mr. Potiphar said, 'let me know. I have a great deal of influence with the police.'

"My decorator friend said there wasn't a thing, and that he had an important engagement, and anyway he didn't feel so well and thought he needed air. It had been rather close in the vegetable bin, he said, what with his having landed head first in a tub of salt pickles.

"When he had gone Captain Potiphar put his arm around me.

"'You are certainly a great little woman, my dear,' he said, 'and I am very proud of you on account of your having saved this young man's life. And just to show you how proud I am, I am going to buy you a new diamond bracelet. So as I have to go to Thebes to-night on im-

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portant official business, and only came home to pack my bag, suppose you go down to the store in the morning and pick out the kind of a bracelet you would like. Do not worry any more about this unfortunate affair because the man was drunk, and you have performed a noble act. So as I am not leaving for two or three hours, you had better put some clothes on and I will take you to the Isis Roof Garden for dinner.'

"I went into my boudoir to get dressed, and Captain Potiphar, who was feeling a bit mellow, followed me. As soon as I got inside the door I had another shock. My friend from Damascus had forgotten his hat and coat.

"'Who do these things belong to?' Mr. Potiphar asked. 'And why are they here in your boudoir?'

"'Captain Potiphar,' I said, doing some more quick thinking, 'I am a poor weak woman, and I have had a hard day, but since you ask me a direct question I will tell you the truth. This afternoon while I was lying down trying to get a little rest after spending all the morning straightening up the place to have it looking

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nice for you when you come home, that handsome young overseer of yours walked in here and tried to kiss me.

“‘What do you mean, young man,’ I said, ‘by this impudence? You know I am a married woman and do not receive gentlemen in my boudoir!’

“He was very persistent, however, and I had a great deal of trouble getting rid of him. Now I see he has left his hat and coat here which I did not notice at the time being so excited. I think you had better get a new overseer, Mr. Potiphar, for this young man is very determined and says he is almost crazy about me because I have such wonderful eyes. So I do not feel quite safe when you are away from home and not here to protect me the way a husband should.’

“Mr. Potiphar was very angry, of course, when he heard this, and called Joseph in. And he got angrier still when Joseph said it wasn’t his hat and coat and anyway I was a dangerous woman and had been making eyes at him all winter.

“‘If I had a wife like that, Mr. Potiphar,’

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Joseph said, 'I would hire somebody to look after her.'

"That is all very well, young man,' Mr. Potiphar told him, 'but I engaged you to look after my farm, not my wife. There are some things a man prefers to look after himself and a wife is one of them. So since I am a captain in the Memphis Marines I am going to have you locked up on a charge of attempting to interfere with an officer in the performance of his duty.'

"That was the end of Joseph, so far as I was concerned," concluded Mrs. Potiphar, leaning back in her chair. "And I hope you girls all see how unjust that gossip about us was. But he *did* have the loveliest eyes. I learned afterwards that he got quite a good position in the commissary department—working for the government."

Lucrezia Borgia lazily blew a cloud of cigarette smoke through her nostrils.

"Really, my dear," she said, "you should go in for literature and write a book. For young girls. As a title, I might suggest, 'How to Get the Best of Husbands.' Have we decided who is to speak at our next meeting?"

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“Phryne has offered to tell us about her celebrated trial,” said Eve.

“Well,” laughed the famous Athenian artist’s model, “my little experience in court taught me one thing at least—it always pays to stick to the truth——”

“The naked truth, I presume you mean,” Salome giggled.

“Quite right, my dear, if you want to get a verdict. Where a woman is concerned, don’t ever let anyone try to tell you that justice is blind.”