

# One Story the Tabloids Couldn't Touch

By William R. Peer

WHEN Judge Francis L. Valente closed his courtroom to the press and public during the most sensational testimony of the Jelke vice trial last winter, the infuriated New York newspapers were unanimous in denouncing the judge's action as "absolutely unprecedented."

The New York newspapers were unanimously wrong. Judge Valente's action was by no means "unprecedented."

Less than a decade ago, 24 men were sent to prison in a vice case that potentially had all of the tabloid appeal of the recent trial of the wealthy young procurer. It involved names that were just as prominent — if not more so — than those contained in the "little black book" submitted by the prosecution as the list of Jelke's customers. And the proceedings delved into labyrinths of viciousness far more devious and sordid than the most lurid testimony of the demure young ladies whose activities in the world's oldest pro-

fession contributed to the ease and luxury of the oleomargarine heir.

But not one word of the proceedings leaked out to the press. Not a single city desk in the sensation-hungry metropolis was even aware of what was going on. Even today, all records in the trial remain sealed, all documents impounded.

The trial broke up, at least temporarily, one of the most bizarre blackmail rings in New York criminal annals — a well-organized group of racketeers that operated on a nationwide basis, preying on wealthy homosexuals.

Authorities estimate that the blackmailers took in at least a million dollars a year, over a period of several years. They have charged to the ring's activities the suicide of at least one socially prominent man from whom they had extorted \$85,000, and still demanded more.

Many other victims of the ruthless and insatiable extortioners are known to have fled their homes and families

and given up important jobs in order to conceal themselves from the blackmailers and the police.

The smashing of the shakedown ring, which took five years to complete, started with a more or less routine tip from a stool pigeon. According to this underworld whisper, a minor official in a branch bank had been fleeced of \$600. The victim, a timid man of middle age, was a homosexual. As it happened, the tip came to the "main office squad," in police headquarters, rather than to a local precinct detective bureau.

**P**RECINCT DETECTIVES, unlike the men in the main office squad, were swamped with a flood of petty complaints, all requiring attention, and under ordinary circumstances would not have had the time to track down a crime on which there was no complaint or official report. The local detectives, moreover, were reluctant to handle cases in which homosexuals were the complainants, because of the difficulty of making such cases stand up in court. They had long ago learned that in cases of assault, robbery, etc., in which the complaining witness was a homosexual, the lawyer for the defense invariably would discredit and humiliate the complainant, and the case would be thrown out of court without any chance for a complete presentation of the facts.

The stool pigeon's tip in the shakedown of the bank employee was turned over to Lieutenant George

McNulty, since retired, who recalls that things were slow around the main office that day; so he sent two of his men over to the bank to have a talk with the blackmail victim.

The bank employee became panic-stricken when the detectives identified themselves and explained the nature of their call. The trembling bank official protested that he could not possibly talk to them in his office, but agreed to meet them in a nearby restaurant during his luncheon period. He kept the appointment, but flatly refused to make a formal complaint or otherwise co-operate with the police, although freely admitting he had been shaken down — not for \$600, but for \$6,720! His job and reputation, his standing in the community, were at stake, he protested; and he would rather stand the loss of the money than the risk of exposure.

Lt. McNulty admits that this might well have been the end of it as far as his squad was concerned. But there was one angle that bothered him; the victim was an employee of a bank and the first demand in blackmail is seldom the last. The extortionists might press the victim to the point where, in utter desperation, he would turn to crime himself, to embezzling bank funds, in order to pay off. With this in mind, Lt. McNulty ordered the two detectives to pick up the bank employee when he finished work that day and bring him in for questioning.

At police headquarters the man

wept and pleaded that the case be dropped, but after hours of persuasion and repeated assurances that he would not have to testify in open court, the wretched deviate broke down and told his story.

THE PATTERN of the racket was simple, with few and minor variations, and was predicated on an abject terror of exposure; a terror so shattering that it would blind the victim to the most transparent of devices and impostures and drive him to any lengths to comply with the blackmailers' demands.

The hunting grounds of the shake-down ring were bars and restaurants which homosexuals were known to frequent. There were, in addition, other places such as railroad terminals and an area near the lake in New York's Central Park where deviates loitered. At one of these places a homosexual, known or thought to be a man of means, would be spotted by a blackmailer acting as a decoy. Usually he would be a personable youth, well-dressed and with engaging manners, whose first assignment was to strike up a conversation with the selected victim.

After striking up an acquaintance, the decoy would carefully guide the conversation to a point where the homosexual would make an indecent proposal. Then the decoy would accompany him to the latter's apartment or to a hotel. During the tryst he would acquire some object, usually engraved or monogrammed,

which could readily be identified as the property of the homosexual.

A few days later, the victim would be visited at his home or office by two men claiming to be detectives and flashing bogus badges. The phoney detectives would swiftly whip out a Police Department criminal identification form bearing a rogues' gallery photograph of the decoy with a number across his chest. These were genuine forms, probably stolen from police stations, but the photographs were made and attached by the ring. The "detectives," explaining that the youth shown in the photograph had been arrested pawning stolen goods, would ask the victim if he could identify him. The thoroughly frightened homosexual would invariably deny ever having seen the man, and he would vehemently deny ownership of the engraved or monogrammed article, obtained by the blackmailer, which was next shown to him. After considerable argument, however, the cop-impersonators would insist they had to bring him to the stationhouse for questioning.

On the way to the stationhouse, the victim would lose all control and commence frantically pleading with the two "detectives" to drop the matter; he would insist that he wished to make no complaint regarding the theft of his property.

AT THIS STAGE, one of the "detectives" would appear to be affected by the importunities of the

deviate, while his partner remained adamant. This byplay would go on for several minutes until the reluctant "officer" would finally weaken and agree that his partner might call the "lieutenant" and see if something couldn't be done to save the victim's job and reputation.

Finally, the fake cops would tell the sweating victim that there was, indeed, a way out. If he would put up the bail for the arrested decoy, they would see to it that the youth jumped bond and did not appear for trial. The whole matter would then be dropped.

The victim usually managed to obtain the "bail money" that same day or a few days later, and with a feeling of profound relief turned it over to his two friends. But his relief was short-lived, for now the "go-backs" started.

There would be visits from men representing themselves as officers assigned to the District Attorney's office, the Chief Inspector's office, the Police Commissioner's office, and some who would claim to be newspaper reporters who had stumbled across the story and were preparing to write it. All these subsequent visits were out-and-out shakedowns, with payment demanded for freedom and silence. As many as ten repeats were known to have been made on a particularly wealthy and frightened victim, with the end not in sight when the blackmailers were arrested.

It was this system of "go-backs"

that brought about the formation of an integrated blackmail ring. By merging the operations of several small, unrelated groups, the blackmailers realized a higher revenue from their activities and reduced the hazard of arrest that would have been created had the same men tried to shakedown a particular victim more than once.

The division of the pay-offs was supposedly on a percentage basis and was, in all, a fluid and inexact arrangement calling for a certain amount of trust on the part of those involved. But, if trust there was, it was sadly misplaced. It was common practice for the collector to cheat the decoys outrageously. Many bloody assaults and, it is suspected, more than one murder, resulted.

STARTING with the suspects brought in after the miserable bank employee had unburdened himself, Lt. McNulty and Herman Stichman, then an assistant district attorney and now New York State Housing Commissioner, began to unravel the tangled shakedown skein. Grilling of suspects in one case produced the names of decoys and "go-back" men in others.

Soon it became apparent to Lt. McNulty and Mr. Stichman that they were dealing not with a few shabby shakedown artists, but with a well-organized ring of blackmailers, carrying on its operations not only in New York, but in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington,

Hollywood and the rest of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, and other cities.

Then began the long, tedious task of tracking down and questioning suspects and, what was infinitely more difficult, the victims. In the ordinary run of police and prosecution work, a complaint of a crime is made, the suspect or suspects picked up, booked, and a court arraignment or grand jury presentation prepared. In these cases, however, the pattern was partly reversed.

Now it was a case of putting the cart before the horse — of bringing in the suspect on information usually supplied by an accomplice, extracting a confession, and then bringing in the victim. Getting information and co-operation from the blackmailers was a simple matter compared to that of inducing the victims to file complaints and agree to appear before the grand jury.

Almost without exception, the victims were men of wealth and some public prominence. There were bankers, industrialists, business executives, famous personalities from the entertainment world, highly respected clergymen, at least one foreign diplomat, society playboys, a noted radio sports commentator, an oil tycoon from Texas. Some were more or less obvious and notorious homosexuals, while others managed to keep their peculiar inclinations in check, except for occasional lapses, and were unsuspected by their business associates, friends, and even

by their own families, in most cases.

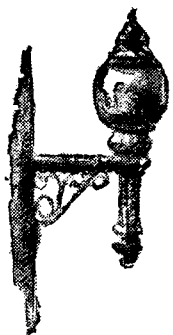
THESE desperate men often were willing to face any consequences to avoid public exposure. Those who did agree to co-operate did so only after being assured that they might use assumed names when appearing before the grand jury and that no mention of their true identities would appear in the newspapers.

"Those people gave me many sleepless nights," Mr. Stichman said. "More than one had threatened to kill himself if his name was made public, and I had nightmares about big headline news stories in which all the names appeared."

The promises of protection for the complaining witnesses were meticulously kept. Even now, years later, this writer was permitted access to records and reports containing the actual names of victims only after he had solemnly sworn never to reveal them either here in this article, or in any manner at any time.

With the single exception of one Carl Forcier, all of the 24 men indicted pleaded guilty. A number of others were never apprehended and one or two skipped bail.

Forcier alone demanded and was given a jury trial. He was found guilty and sentenced to from six to twelve years in Sing Sing. Most of these vicious blackmailers, if not all, have completed their prison terms and may once again be on the prowl for the "fair game" on which they grew so fat.



# I *Don't* Like CATS

By HUGH ROBERT ORR

I AM not a lover of cats. My old tom — Hannibal, by name — who occupies a corner of my desk as I write, enjoys that privilege by special dispensation. I saved his life when he was a mere kitten, treated and bound up his wounds after a vicious dog had well-nigh made an end of him, and then nursed him back to health over a period of many weeks.

After all that, I can hardly default on the obligation. But at his demise, my responsibility will have been discharged, and I shall forthwith consider myself no longer beholden to any member of the feline tribe.

No, I *don't* like cats. I make this statement boldly and without the least sense of shame or indecency, in spite of the fact that many of my best friends regard this as some sub-human trait. This may not be a rational attitude on my part, and probably Shylock was right in arguing that there is no logical reason why any person should not be able to abide a "harmless necessary cat." I suppose every family is entitled to

at least one of these *neither* harmless nor necessary creatures, but there certainly should be a law prohibiting their neighbors from having any.

The cat problem in my family isn't so bad as it used to be, I'm happy to say. Hannibal is the only remaining representative of several generations of cats that have in years past shared our domestic felicity. The male ancestor of all these generations was a big pedigreed Siamese which my young daughter purchased with her own money, saved over a long period for that purpose.

That Siamese was a royal fellow, well worthy to sire a noble line of posterity. I have never seen another creature, man or beast, who could walk with the stately swagger, the nonchalant to-hell-with-you demeanor of that cat. My daughter named him Casanova, a cognomen which I'm sure he aspired to live up to in spite of the restraints of apartment life in the city.

We soon became very fond of the big fellow — that is to say, my wife