

Waxing Rich

By HUGH LEAMY

Sylvester Zeffarino Poli made marvelous wax figures. Then he made millions, but his talk is of his first love: the thrillers of yesteryear

ONE midnight a few years ago they telephoned Sylvester Zeffarino Poli—got him out of bed—to tell him that his Hyperion Theatre in New Haven was on fire. It stood only five blocks from his home.

"That's too bad indeed," said the showman. "Anybody hurt?"

"Oh, no; it had been emptied for the night."

"Well, that's good. Thank you for calling me."

"But aren't you coming down?"

"Why should I? I'll see it in the morning."

And Mr. Poli returned to his couch and slept once more.

His secretary told me that instance to show how Mr. Poli adhered to his policy of never letting anything worry him. Of course when you start out with a set of tools and a certain ability as a creator of waxworks and find yourself at sixty-seven able to dispose of your amusement-purveying holdings for several millions—estimated by some at \$30,000,000—it's pretty easy to sit back and tell folks to take things calmly. But:

"Listen, if I'd been the worrying kind," said Mr. Poli, "I never could have survived all these years, especially in this business. In any field, if you can train yourself not to worry, to have plenty of nerve and to keep a step or two ahead of the general run of things, you can't help but get over."

Still, there must have been moments when the Policy of Placidity was severely strained. That day, for instance, when the Egyptian Museum in Philadelphia burned to the ground three days after its opening, destroying waxen effigies to the carving of which Poli had devoted a year and a half.

Even in this tragedy, however, there was one saving circumstance which made it easy for the disappointed sculptor to retain his buoyancy.

"The building with its five floors of wax figures was completely destroyed," he will tell you. "Several firemen were killed, the metal roof was melted and there were no walls left. But when we dug into the ruins we found standing, intact and unharmed on its three-foot platform, a group showing the crucifixion of Christ. Mind you, that group was made of beeswax, and even if it hadn't been actually exposed to the flames you'd have thought the intense heat must have melted it. But there it was—not even blackened by smoke. People came from miles around to see

Sylvester Poli was born in Lucca, the on December 31, 1859. His father was an organist at the village church. He had leanings toward the

Figures from the late war are more popular, in wax, than McKinley, whose image stands in a dark corner



Poli, of wax, vaudeville and films

olive-oil business—which young Sylvester decidedly had not—there wasn't much to hold one in Lucca. So at thirteen the lad took off for Paris, where he learned the art of wax modeling under one M. Dablex, who wielded a mean chisel in those days. He learned it so well that he got a staff modeling job with the Musée Cravans in Paris.

Marrying into Wax

THEN, no sooner had he completed his period of military service in Italy than he was offered a job with the once-famous Eden Musee in New York. That sort of thing helps, you know. When you've just turned twenty-one and you find the New World about which you've dreamed actually reaching across the ocean to invite you to come over, it helps make worry seem a futile, unnecessary thing.

It was during the three years that he spent in New York doing his darnedest by the leading gunmen, monarchs, politicians and other public figures of the day that he met Rose Leverone at a christening party. He

took her to see his achievements in beeswax. She was enchanted.

"I said to myself," Mrs. Poli relates, "this is grand work. If the only way to learn it is to marry the professor—well, I'll marry him."

So they were married that same year, and "the professor" set out to teach his sixteen-year-old bride the art of modeling, coloring, and the delicate operation of needling eyebrows and beards and heads of hair into the wax figures.

There's a great deal more, it would seem, to turning out wax effigies than most persons think. The wax has to be melted in a pot set in water, and it must be kept at just the right temperature. And the colorings are mixed, as the wax boils, by being dropped into the pot. Then the molds must be greased just so.

"If the mold is too greasy, the wax will crack as it gets cold; if it's not greased enough, it will stick to the mold," says Mr. Poli. Something like waffles, apparently.

But the dizziest part of making a wax figure must be putting in the eyebrows and mustaches and "front hairs." For each one of these must be put in place by hand. Mr. Poli demonstrated vividly how the artist uses a needle broken off at the top so as to leave a gap at one end of the thread hole. Into this the hair is threaded, and then this end of the needle is forced down into the wax and given a sharp twist, after which the needle is withdrawn, leaving the hair firmly in place.

That's all labor. The artistic skill comes in making the figure resemble the man you've set out to model. Incidentally, Mr. Poli will tell you that a Lincoln is easy—about two hours.

"There's so much beard," he explains, and this beard, going in place later,

covers the lower part of the wax adequately. A Cleveland is hard because that President had no fixed expression with which the public was familiar. By the same token, Wilson is not so easy, while Roosevelt and Coolidge—the latter because of his "set expression"—are cinches.

Murdering a Movie Hero

MR. POLI got out of waxworks and leaped into vaudeville and films in time to anticipate and cater to the generation which wouldn't pay a dime to watch Praxiteles himself modeling the hanging of Gerald Chapman. However, he remembers vividly and warmly the days when waxworks claimed a loyal public. And however much his ears may be attuned to box-office cash registers, much of his heart, I think, lies in the mustier museums peopled by ladies and gentlemen of beeswax.

He shook his head sadly when I recalled a recent incident in one of the few surviving waxworks emporiums.

It seems that for several placid months a gentleman bearing some resemblance to a lamented motion-picture actor had nestled cozily among the lilies in his little section of The World in Wax. Life had been well-ordered, if uneventful, and there was a certain warm glow to be derived from the hushed homage of the thousands.

Consequently it was something of a jolt to the lad, that morning not long ago, when he was rudely hustled from his bier, outfitted with tortoise-shell spectacles, a window weight and a length of picture wire and cast as Judd Gray in The Brutal Snyder Murder tableau just across the hall.

But—what would you? Your waxworks entrepreneur must shave minutes and costs if he's going to keep pace with the news-gorged public. But in the olden, golden days of waxworks such a shift would not have been considered cricket. (Continued on page 52)



Culver Service

The Piano-Playin' Fool

By
**HOWARD
MCLELLAN**

Illustrated by R. V. CULTER

*The true story of stolen
treasure, a girl, and a
musical man hunter*



*Her fingers were
going through the
same motions that
his were going
through on the
keys*

JIMMIE SWANTON had acquired the habit of taking his morning ham and eggs in Dapper Dan's Midway Café. The eats were not so much. But there were other items that drew him there: the place suited his convenience and pleasure rather than his palate. After a morning hour spent tramping the Main Stem, which was the yegg label for St. Peter Street, in search of evil faces that were tagged "wanted" at the office, the young undercover operative of the Secret Service stepped into the Midway to breakfast. It refreshed Jimmie to shunt himself out of the drab parade of gray-faced floaters and bound into the vivacious presence of Miss Kitty, who was peddling on a cashier's high stool beaming graciously upon Dapper's customers. There was a piano in the place too. Although, like the food, it was not so much, Jimmie topped off late breakfasts with a go at the soiled keys. He was inveterately pianistic. Thus each visit to the Midway meant a triple play—he satisfied his hunger for food, for music and, to boot, exchanged wisecracks with Miss Kitty, who did not know him for what he really was. She was wild about music, and this windfall almost every morning gave her a zestful start for the day.

THE Secretary of the Treasury had called for a show-down on the Humboldt gold robbery. "Here," the chief had said to Jimmie, "take this case and clean it up. I'm fed up with it, but it's got to be closed satisfactorily." He handed a file of papers to Jimmie, then added: "Don't double back on any of the

work that's already been done. Get a fresh start, but confine your work to one thing—find the party that played the piano on the Humboldt the night she was docked at the pier. You'll find all the story in the file."

Jimmie was flabbergasted and far from overjoyed. He had never done more than dirty work around the office, shadowing counterfeiters and roping in crooked simps. Now the toughest nut in the files had been handed him.

HE TOOK the file into an outer room and ran through it hurriedly. He learned that the steamer Humboldt, on her last trip out from Nome to Seattle a year back, carried \$98,000 in gold bars destined for the Government Assay Office at Seattle. The boat was crowded with tenderfeet getting away from the gold fields before navigation closed for the winter. At Juneau thieves entered the purser's office, unlocked the ship's strong box and hauled out the treasure, substituting bars of solder that had been stolen from a salmon cannery. The strong box lay in the Assay Office some time before it was opened and the loss discovered. This delay gave the thieves a head start. At first an inside job was suspected. Things looked bad for the purser. While the steamer was warped to her dock at Juneau the passengers whooped it up in the dining saloon. There was dancing and music. The purser, an honest, easy-going Bavarian with a deep love in his soul for old tunes of the Fatherland, had been attracted to the party by the haunting strains of Traumerel, which one of the women passengers played intermittently until the ship left Juneau, after that it was heard no more. In the purser's absence the thieves had entered his office and rifled the strong box. Beyond that the Secret Service had not penetrated. Passengers had been checked; the purser exonerated, but the siren who had played the haunting melody had disappeared.

Now, a year after the robbery, Jimmie, the cub sleuth, was handed the job of finding this woman—one among so many millions. He closed the file and rose from his chair. A deep guffaw rolled out from a desk near the window. Jimmie saw Steve Doolittle, one of the veterans, quaking with laughter. "So the chief has handed the great heart wringer to the piano-playin' fool," Doolittle chuckled to Tommy Foster, his partner. Jimmy smarted under this disparaging comment. "Yes," he retorted hotly, "since you Sherlocks did so well on it!" An hour after Jimmie had tucked away in his mind the details of the Humboldt case a thumb pressed on the brass latch of the Midway door and he was once more in the presence of the kittenish Miss Kitty. "The ivory-tickling demon," was her greeting. "I'm starving for a tune." "And I'm starving for a plate of ham," said Jimmie. "Ham-and for the piano wrangler," Kitty bawled out in a metallic voice. Jimmie ate the portion with relish. He was breakfasting an hour late. The new job was on his mind and indifferently he listened to the frothy badinage Miss Kitty shot his way.

He arose and put on his hat, but, instead of making for the piano—usually his next move after eating—ambled over to the counter. He tossed a half dollar into Miss Kitty's open hands, then started for the door. "What!" exclaimed Miss Kitty. "No tune this morning?" "Gotta job," said Jimmie. "Aw, come on, kid, rattle the old can for just a few minutes," she pleaded as Jimmie stood at the half-opened door. "The house'll buy your ham-and this morning," she went on, "if you'll tickle us a tune." She held out the half dollar to Jimmie and pitched her head back coquettishly. The strands of her bobbed hair fluffed out, betraying to Jimmie's keen young eyes the fact that instead of a natural blonde, she was a redhead. Close to her scalp her hair was a bright red.

IT SEEMED odd to him that a woman would give up red for a washed-out straw color, when most of the sex, if they went in for hair coloring at all, favored red. "Well, I'll tear off a couple of bars for you . . . Red," he smiled. "Red!" Miss Kitty cried, frowning. "What do you mean?" Jimmie did not answer, but walked over to the (Continued on page 34)