

The Magic Popgun

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

MISS MOTT, engaged in her usual Wednesday afternoon task of answering the inevitable crop of letters demanding her advice in next week's "Home Talks," paused in perplexity before one of the last she opened. It was written on what appeared to be club stationery of expensive quality, but the address at the top had been carefully cut out:

Dear Miss Mott:

Give me your advice, please, in the next issue of your paper. I have recently met and been immensely attracted by a young lady whose friendship and affection I should much like to gain. Unfortunately I have not, up to now, led what is termed a respectable life, and I am afraid if she became aware of the nature of my profession she would not grant me the privilege of her acquaintance. Should I be justified, under the circumstances, bearing in mind the fact that my intentions are what are termed "strictly honorable," in seeking her friendship under an assumed name, and endeavoring to secure her interest in me before I divulge my profession?

Please reply to

V. J.

Miss Mott placed this epistle on one side and answered all the others first. Then she turned back to the waiting letter, lifted it for one moment to her dainty nostrils, and half closed her eyes. Afterward, with no further display of sentiment, she thrust a sheet of paper into her typewriter, and dealt with it:

V. J.: I am surprised that you should ask me such an unintelligent question. Under no circumstances would you be justified in approaching the young lady until you have entirely changed the manner of your life, and are prepared to live according to accepted standards.

Miss Mott, whose touch upon her typewriter was usually both light and delicate, thumped out these few lines with unaccustomed force and energy. Afterward she rang the bell for the tall, bespectacled young girl who acted as her secretary.

"Ring up Scotland Yard for me, Amy," she instructed, "and inquire whether Superintendent Detective Wragge is in. If so, put me through to him on the telephone."

"Superintendent Detective Wragge. Yes, Miss Mott."

"My uncle," the latter continued. "And afterward, Amy, take this package of manuscript round to the 'Home Talks' office."

The girl accepted a bulky envelope, and retreated to her own den. Presently the telephone bell rang. Miss Mott exchanged a few words with her uncle, and arranged to lunch with him at one-fifteen that day at the Milan Grill Room.

SUPERINTENDENT DETECTIVE WRAGGE was a big, loosely built man, whose success in his profession could not have depended in any way upon his ability to disguise himself from his prospective victims, for he was a person of unusual appearance. He was over six feet tall, and his face was large, creased and lined. His eyes were shrewd and penetrating, his mouth sensitive and humorous. He might more easily have been taken for a cabinet minister or a barrister than a detective.

His successes had mostly been achieved from the armchair behind his desk, and were owing in large measure to his amazing memory of and insight into the ways and habits of the criminal world. He was commonly reported to be able to tell you offhand the favorite haunts and habits of any well-known evildoer, together with his chosen brand of cigarettes, and any other personal details. He seldom stirred from his room in Scotland Yard, but, on the few occasions when he sallied out professionally, either eastward or westward, things usually happened. He was very fond of his only niece, and it was, to a certain extent, under his auspices that she had combined her present venture with her newspaper activities.

"Is it true, Uncle," Miss Mott asked him, during the course of their lunch, "that you know the names and nicknames of every one of the principal criminals in London?"

"Perfectly true, my dear," he assented. "Nothing much in that. There aren't more than twenty or thirty of what we call 'big shots.' The remainder work under them in gangs."

"Do you know of a criminal I read about in the papers once, whose nickname is Violet Joe?" she inquired artlessly.

"Why, do you?"

She was a little disconcerted by the swiftness of the rejoinder but she adroitly concealed the fact.

"I HEARD him spoken of the other day, quite by accident," she confided. "I haven't any information about him, if that's what you were hoping."

"No, I don't suppose you would have," her uncle mused. "Violet Joe doesn't give himself away like some of the others do. If you were in a position to do anything about him it would be the biggest send-off your show could possibly have."

"He's—bad?"

"I wouldn't say that he's bad, but he's terribly clever," Superintendent Wragge replied, with an unusual note of seriousness in his tone. "He and his chief—Boss Meredith—are about the only two of the big five I couldn't lay my hands on at any time if there was any object in it. Violet Joe's too clever for the ordinary police brain. All we can hope is that some day he makes just one slip. Then we'll have a look into his past."

"That doesn't sound very pleasant," Miss Mott shivered.

"Crime isn't pleasant," was her uncle's dry response. "Let's not talk about it. Have an ice before your coffee?"

"I will have a chocolate and vanilla ice mixed," Miss Mott announced, "and, in the meanwhile, why shouldn't we talk of it? In my new department I might be mixed up with criminals at any moment. Crime fascinates me. I'm tired of giving advice about these courtship and domestic matters. I should like to be drawn into a really serious affair."

"Then you're a little fool, and I'm sorry I ever encouraged you to start your intelligence agency," Superintendent

Wragge growled. "Crime—real crime—is an ugly and beastly thing. I don't suppose you'll ever come in touch with it, and I sincerely hope you won't."

THEIR conversation was broken into in somewhat abrupt fashion. A good-looking, exceedingly well-turned-out young man, who was passing their table, paused and, with a courteous bow, held out his hand to the superintendent. He was moderately tall, with clean-cut features, a pleasant mouth, shrewd eyes and brown hair which had a distinct

wave in it where it was brushed back behind his ears. He wore a blue serge suit, with a tie of elusive purple, and a bunch of violets in his buttonhole.

"Superintendent Wragge, isn't it?" he remarked, with an ingratiating smile. "I am afraid you don't remember me."

"Not entirely," the superintendent admitted, as he shook hands. "To say that your face is familiar wouldn't be exactly a compliment, as you seem to know my profession."

"About two months ago," the newcomer reminded him, "you came to Amberley Square—wedding reception, you know—Lady Hoskinson's. You had a man there already, watching over the wedding presents, but you thought you might spot a petty thief you were after."

"I remember the circumstance, but not you," the superintendent meditated. The young man sighed.

"Lady Hoskinson is my aunt," he confided. "Victor Jones is my name. I



ILLUSTRATED BY
FLOYD M. DAVIS

asked you to have a drink, and you wouldn't."

The superintendent shook his head. "It doesn't sound like me," he objected. "All the same, there was a—what did you say your name was?"

"Victor Jones," the young man repeated. "Might I have the pleasure—"

He glanced toward Miss Mott. Her uncle accepted the hint.

"Mr. Victor Jones—my niece, Miss Mott."

THE young man took Miss Mott's somewhat timidly proffered hand in his. She looked into his eyes, and fear came.

"I am delighted," he murmured.

There was a moment's somewhat curious silence. For some reason or other Miss Mott, not usually a shy young woman, seemed incapable of speech.

"You hadn't the best of luck that night, had you, Superintendent Wragge?" Mr. Victor Jones continued easily. "Your man was there. You knew that. You couldn't spot him, and the diamond

pendant was stolen. Never been recovered to this day, my aunt tells me."

"You seem to have the events of that evening at your finger ends," Superintendent Wragge remarked, "but, curiously enough, even now I don't seem to remember you."

He frowned, as though in a further effort of memory, gazing intently at the young man. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. Mr. Victor Jones was bending over Miss Mott, and she was trying hard to take no note of the appeal in his eyes, to be reckless of the scent of violets creeping once more into her nostrils. Her heart was beating fast. Furthermore, she was somehow conscious of the sense of drama closing in upon her.

"You, too, they tell me, are in a small way a follower in your uncle's profession," remarked the engaging stranger.

"A very small way indeed," she assented deprecatingly.

She raised her eyes and looked at him, and what he saw in those blue depths was quite sufficient warning to him. He smiled back a message of re-

assurance, and he left her swiftly. She herself had heard nothing, but she had seen her uncle's urgent summons to the *maitre d'hôtel*, the whispered replies, the man's hurried departure, and egress through the door. Then she heard a disappointed exclamation. Mr. Victor Jones had swung away from the door, crossed the Grill Room, and plunged into the restaurant, disappearing almost at once among the incoming crowd. Superintendent Wragge, with an agility little short of marvelous, followed him, and Miss Mott was left alone with her thoughts.

IT WAS at least a quarter of an hour before Superintendent Wragge reappeared. He resumed his seat very much as though nothing had happened, but he pushed to one side the glass of very mild white wine, a bottle of which he was sharing with his niece, and ordered a double whisky-and-soda.

"Sorry to leave you, my dear," he apologized. "I had an idea—merely an idea—but one can't afford in my profession to neglect even the semblance of one. That young man now! What the mischief made him come to this table, and tell me a deliberate falsehood?"

"Did he?" Miss Mott asked simply.

"You heard him tell me that his name was Victor Jones, and that he had met me at his aunt's the afternoon the old lady persuaded me to go in there and superintend the arrangements for guarding her daughter's wedding presents. That was a distinct untruth. I never met him there, or anyone like him. The only young man who approached me was a fair, insignificant little chap, with an eyeglass, who was a brother of the bride, and even he didn't ask me to have a drink. What this fellow's object

was in telling me that rigmarole, I cannot imagine."

"Perhaps," Miss Mott suggested modestly, "he wanted an introduction to me. I am afraid—he had been looking at me a good deal, and everyone knows who you are, so I dare say he tried a bluff."

Superintendent Detective Wragge stroked his chin, and regarded his niece thoughtfully.

"That never occurred to me," he acknowledged. "You are, I suppose, personable. It may have been that after all."

"Tell me about your idea," she begged. "What made you send for the *maitre d'hôtel*, and afterward follow the young man?"

Her uncle leaned forward in his place. He satisfied himself that there was no one else within hearing distance.

"I will tell you," he confided. "We have information that Violet Joe is in town, and that there is something doing almost at once. That young man had to pass my table. He is notorious for doing impudent things. It would have been just like him to try to establish a false identity with me. Then look at his name. Probably invented on the spur of the moment—Victor Jones—Violet Joe. Look at the clever way he disappeared too. There was a touch of the habitual criminal there."

Miss Mott looked at her vis-à-vis very earnestly.

"Do you really believe that that was Violet Joe who stopped at this table and to whom I was introduced?" she asked him pointblank.

"It might have been," was as far as her uncle would commit himself.

INSIDE her little office, Miss Mott was depressed. For two weeks, not a caller, legitimate or otherwise, had disturbed the serenity of her days. Then, about five o'clock in the afternoon, the crash came. Miss Mott began to be very busy indeed.

A telephone call, from her uncle at Scotland Yard, started the riot.

"Seen or heard anything more about that young man who disturbed our luncheon party?" he inquired.

"The young man who might have been Violet Joe? I was going to ask you that. Not a thing. Have you?" Miss Mott rejoined innocently.

"Indirectly. I believe he is about, though. We must have another luncheon one day next week."

"I should love to. I have no engagements."

He still held on.

"By the bye, Lucie," he said, "if ever anything should happen to me suddenly—foul weather this for elderly people, and I've got a bit of a cough—my will is at Wyman's, the solicitor, 18 Holborn Row. Got that?"

"Why, of course, Uncle, but what's the matter?" she inquired, suddenly alarmed. "You're not ill, are you?"

"Not I," he assured her. "I am perfectly well, but—I'm going out tonight after Violet Joe's crowd."

FOOTSTEPS upon the stairs—just as she was putting on her hat! Soft, swift footsteps, mounting through the darkness of the two upper flights of stairs. She waited, pulses quickening. To others it might have seemed long—Miss Mott had lost count of time—the footsteps at the door, the masked face peering through the aperture, the cautious, furtive entrance, the figure of her former visitor, lithe, alert, the flashing eyes, pinpricks of fire darting round the room.

"You are alone?" he snapped out.

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The men in front of him threw up their hands readily enough. Then from behind came a grip of steel, and back went the automatics, clattering onto the carpet

Why Not Dictatorship?

By Winston Churchill

ILLUSTRATED BY D. R. FITZPATRICK

This is an age of change, quick change; can constitutions and parliaments keep pace with it? Perhaps we ought to junk them and choose a dictator. Look at Italy. Look at Germany. Yes, look at them, says Mr. Churchill, and be grateful the English-speaking peoples still have their constitutions. They cost us plenty and they're still worth it

THERE is a fearsome levity in the frequency with which this question is asked nowadays. All over Europe nations have been found ready to sweep away the entire political structure of government under which they have dwelt, and to adopt entirely new methods without the slightest attempt either to appraise the value of what they are throwing aside or to measure the future.

Many people, even in England, will speak of getting a different system of government with no more seriousness than they would bestow on choosing a new suit of clothes. "We have had enough of Parliament and all that; let's try something else. So-and-so seems a good man; tell him to run the country and make it powerful and rich." This mood has now spread to the United States.

*"For forms of government let fools contest,
Whate'er is best administered is best."*

Yet these same forms of government have from the dawn of civilization engaged at frequent intervals the thoughts and the passions of the leading races of mankind. Despotisms wise or wicked, monarchies hereditary or elective, republics and oligarchies of every character, together with interludes of democracy or mob rule, have filled the histories of every progressive people. Always the constitutional instrument has been judged of supreme importance and attempts to change it suddenly or drastically have usually been accompanied by the shedding of much blood. Certainly one would not feel that any nation would go far or survive long if it

were careless or ignorant about the relation of its individual citizens to the state.

The first question which we must ask ourselves is: What kind of life do we wish to lead in our brief span? When we have made up our minds about this, it will be much easier to judge the merits of various systems of government. It should be noticed that up till this chaotic twentieth century the chief desire of all the noblest and most successful races has been to secure and preserve the rights and status of the individual citizen; and to protect him from the ambition, greed, malice or caprice of rulers.

A high degree of personal freedom and a sense of lawful independence has certainly been the main characteristic not only of the British people, but of the English-speaking races, now spread so widely through the world. Freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of movement, freedom to choose or change employment. The inviolability of even the humblest home; the right and the power of the private citizen to appeal to impartial courts against the

state and against the ministers of the day; freedom of speech and writing; freedom of the press; freedom of combination and agitation within the limits of long-established laws; the right of regular opposition to the government; the power to turn out a government and put another set of men in its place by lawful constitutional means; and finally the sense of association with the state and of some responsibility for its actions and conduct. All these make the greatest part of the message which the English people have given to the human race.

While Freedom Slumbered

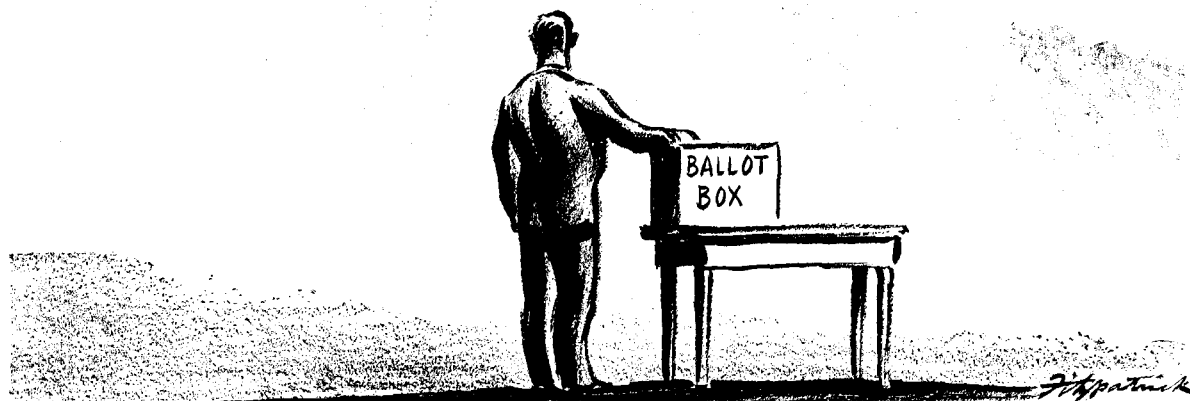
The original conception of these privileges, or some of them, was born in ancient Greece. They were practiced in the classic days of Rome. They were trampled under foot in the dark ages of brutish barbarism. For more than a thousand years the whole world groveled under dictatorships and tyrannies of absolute kings, soldiers and priests. But the inspiration lived while it slumbered. It revived again in a

small island shrouded in the northern mists.

Leaders arose who struggled and suffered. The rights and freedom of citizens or subjects were asserted, albeit in a primitive form, against arbitrary power. Parliament came into effective being. The Pilgrim Fathers set out for the New World to establish the freedom denied to them in the Old. Wars were fought; battles were gained. Tyrants or those who represented tyranny were decapitated. Very slowly, inch by inch, year by year, generation by generation, the rulers were taught that a new force had established itself. Oliver Cromwell, William III and John, Duke of Marlborough, were champions who by their swords made this system of free government resound with ringing blows upon the pates of the dictatorships of Europe with their ground-down, miserable populations.

Fortune, or perhaps it was Almighty God, rewarded the prescient island. For a long space the treasures of the New World and of the future were poured into its lap. Dazzling empire,

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The English-speaking peoples have powerful safeguards against threats of bondage