

THE SECOND STEWARD

BY GEORGE BARTON

THE chief inspector of customs lay back in a great big easy chair in his bachelor apartment overlooking Washington square and learnedly discoursed upon the philosophy of crime. Alan Forward, his friend, the chemist, who had dropped in to pay a call, forgot the movements of the hands on the clock and sat there absorbed in the flow of wit and wisdom that came unintermittently from the lips of the veteran of the government service. Barnes was about to clinch one of his favorite propositions when he was interrupted by a gentle tap on the door.

"Come in!" he cried in freezingly official tones.

The door opened and Cornelius Clancy entered. Clancy was popularly known as the shadow of the chief, but he was physically substantial, and if the twinkling eyes and the always present smile counted, a very merry shadow. Anyhow, Barnes regarded him as vitally essential to his business, and the aggressive little fellow had shared in the capture of many celebrated smugglers. He burst into the room now with the air of a man full of information, but when he perceived a stranger he stopped short and stood on the door rug, rubbing his smooth chin in a meditative fashion.

"Go on, Con," said the chief encouragingly. "don't mind Mr. Forward."

"It's not much," responded the young man, taking his breath. "The Vulture passed breakfast this afternoon and is anchored in midstream. The night inspectors are up in the air and say you'll have to look her over."

Barnes sighed deeply and ran his hand through his luxuriant snow white hair. Then he turned to Forward.

"I hate to stop this argument," he called his monologue an argument. "Just when I'm getting the best of you, but before we quit I want to insist that the human body does not inherit disease, but it does inherit tendencies. Now I carry this to its logical conclusion and say that we inherit mental as well as physical tendencies. Hence the crime in some families; hence—"

Forward burst into a laugh and threw up both hands.

"Surrender, Barnes. You can quit happy."

A smile of satisfaction spread over the old man's face, and the smile dropped to years from his nose. He tossed off his glasses and began pulling on his garters. He looked at his visitor.

"Maybe you'd like to go down to the wharf with us. Three wouldn't be a crowd—not in this case."

"Delighted, I'm sure," responded Forward, with alacrity. "But if I'm in the way you must not hesitate to say so."

"Oh, you're not in the way," replied Barnes. "Besides, with a tentative look, we might take up this argument where we left off."

"Didn't I tell you I surrendered?" interjected the other.

"Yes," grumbled the chief, "you did. Then, bolting into another room, you gave in too quickly. There's no sport in that sort of a victory."

While Barnes prepared for his hurry call Forward had an opportunity of studying the room. It was plainly furnished, the most conspicuous article in the room being the bookcase.

They filled every available inch of the wall space. A closer inspection revealed the fact that they were all works of reference. Fiction seemed to be rigidly tabooed. One shelf filled with long thin volumes, in plain bindings, contained the annual reports read at the meetings of the American Prison association. The other volumes had such titles as "Crimes and Criminals," "Criminology," "National Crimes," "Great Crimes of the Nineteenth Century," "The Psychology of Kleptomania," "The Criminal Insane," "Juvenile Offenders" and "Remarkable Trials."

Presently Forward turned to Clancy with a half yawn.

"The old man's a long while."

Clancy smiled so broadly that both rows of teeth glistened beneath the rays of the electric light. He answered with the air of a man who is revealing secrets of state:

"He's shaving."

"Yes; he's a perfect crank on it. Has to have his hair twice a day, or he's miserable. You came in tonight and interfered with it. But he won't go out without his shave."

"Well, I'll be darned," murmured Forward.

"That's not all," exclaimed Clancy, proudly.

"Not all?"

"No, there's something else; just you wait and see."

Barnes emerged ready for the street. He went into the room of the room and pulled out a small table, containing a spirit lamp and a small urn. He struck a match, lighted the lamp and the water began to bubble. In a few minutes the room was filled with the aroma of coffee. Several large cups were on the table. Barnes filled one. He approached the chemist.

"Have a dish of coffee?"

"Not on your life," was the quick response. "If I drank that I'd see snakes all night."

Barnes looked at him with an indulgent smile. He surveyed the coffee at a gulp; then he took a second cup.

"I couldn't live without it," he said.

Five minutes later they left the room, and taking a short cut through the square, walked hurriedly in the direction of the river front. The streets were deserted. The hands on a big clock pointed to a few minutes past midnight. A deathlike stillness hung over the city. The three men were silent, but the sound of their footsteps echoed through the air with military precision. As they passed the waterfront Barnes suggested that Forward and Clancy fall in the rear, while he quietly slipped ahead to take a survey of the river.

The chief moved with catlike agility. His step was swift and springy, and all of his senses were on the alert. Barnes was a tall, thin, angular man, with the look of a farrier dressed in his Sunday clothes. His smooth face was irregular, but singularly attractive. There were deep furrows around his bushy eyebrows, dark circles beneath the contemplative black eyes, and a set of fine wrinkles on each side of the rather large and prominent nose. A dimple in the chin and a pair of full lips modified the forbidding look which his face habitually wore in repose. His energy belied the indolent suggestiveness of the big boned and loose jointed body. Occasionally he bit the nail of his left thumb, and at such times the severity of his face was intensified.

"What's he going to do?" finally asked the young chemist of Clancy.

"Don't ask me," exclaimed the assistant, with a dramatic wave of the hand. "The old man knows his business, but no one else knows it."

The mystery of the thing only deepened Forward's admiration for the chief inspector. He had often heard of the celebrated cases in which this man had figured, but now he was to see history in the making. The glimpses of the human side of Barnes added to the fascination, for he would dream that this old white-haired man who shaved twice a day, drank coffee by the quart and talked of criminology and jurisprudence like a judge on the bench, would be capable of



THE MAN DANCING IN MID-AIR WAS PICTURED IN A HOLE OF BRIGHT LIGHT

frustrating the sordid devices of vulgar smugglers?

The chief made his survey quickly and beckoned to the others to join him. A deep-throated bell was striking twelve. The old man pulled out an open-faced silver watch, the back of which was perfectly smooth and constant wear. A piece of cord that resembled a shoestring served the purposes of a watchband. Barnes scanned the face of his timepiece and then gave a whimsical smile as if to say that the big clock was right.

"The fog was thick on the river, and at long intervals the silence was broken by the shrill piping of some vessel as it plowed its dangerous way up or down the stream. Through the dense veil that hung over the waters could be seen a dirty yellow blur. Clancy pointed in that direction.

"That's the lantern hanging on the bow of the Vulture."

The chief meditated for a moment. There was a silent chewing of the thumb nail. Presently he spoke:

"This is not a waiting game, Clancy. It's a case for speedy action. Is the launch ready?"

Clancy's reply was a low, prolonged whistle. Soon a faint puff, puff was heard, and a rakish looking little boat glided out of the fog from nowhere and waited their service.

They climbed in. The engineer and two uniformed night inspectors awaited them. Barnes whispered something to the man in charge of the steering apparatus. He gazed at the mist before him, and started in the direction of the dirty yellow blur. The moon, which had been shining, crept behind a big cloud, and the darkness was complete. The fog added to the raw and chilly air, made the adventure uncertain as well as disagreeable. A headlight was fastened on the bow of the launch, but it was kept covered as much as possible so as not to unduly alarm the occupants of the Vulture. Once when a big ferryboat coming from the other side nearly capsized the launch the men were grumbling, but Barnes soothed the whole question with a terse reference to the old adage about a miss being as good as a mile. A little later a puffing tug, pulling a great coal barge, barely grazed the stern of the launch.

Presently the moon came out again, and soon after that the fog was dissipated a bit. The dirty yellow blur became more pronounced, and it finally developed into a distant light against the background of the misty night. The black hull of the Vulture came into sight, and while the eye of every man in the launch was glued on the big vessel the three men were started by a splash, as if something had dropped into the water. When their eyes were again pronounced, they saw that a boat had been lowered and that a man was climbing down the rope ladder.

"Clancy," said Barnes, softly, "you take charge of this."

The nimble assistant picked up a dark lantern and pointed it in the direction of the rowboat. When it was properly focused, Clancy sat in the bow of the boat, his head down and his shoulders hunched, as Barnes afterward declared, like Napoleon on the retreat from Moscow. As soon as they were up at the wharf the chief grabbed his assistant by the arm.

"Dismiss the night inspectors and join me. There's work to be done yet."

Clancy instantly came out of his stu-

por. Barnes' words aroused all of the hopefulness in his optimistic nature. He did as he was bid, and when he had reached the wharf he followed him. You stay here with Forward until I return."

In a few minutes Tallman climbed up on the wharf, puffing from the exertion of rowing in from midstream. He hurried out of the wharf and started up the main street. Barnes followed. Once or twice the steward paused and looked behind him. Then he resumed his journey and did not stop until he reached the Snug Harbor inn, a hotel much patronized by seafaring men. Although it was 2 o'clock in the morning the place was brilliantly lighted. The Snug Harbor inn prided itself on being open "at all hours of the day and night."

The second steward started for the desk, but, apparently changing his mind, directed his steps to the little booth where a telegraph operator sat unheeded. He picked up a pen, and, taking one of the blanks, quickly wrote a message. He turned it upside down on a blotter that he was holding, and the fresh ink had been dried, read it over carefully. It appeared to satisfy him, and he handed it to the operator, who counted the words and informed Tallman what it would cost. He paid the toll and a district messenger boy grabbed the message and hurried out of the room.

For a moment Barnes was in a dilemma. He bit the nail of his thumb vigorously. But almost while he thought his decision was made, he would let the boy go and follow the second steward. That person sauntered about idly and presently went into the barroom. Instantly the chief rushed up to the telegraph operator:

"The gentleman who just left handed you a telegram?"

"Yes," was the reply in a tone of surprise.

"Can I see it a moment?"

"No," was the blunt response.

"Nothing," said the gentleman, made a mistake," ventured the inspector.

"Then the gentleman will have to correct it himself," was the business-like reply.

This was so reasonable that Barnes was nonplussed. The moments were rushing by. He must see the telegram and see it quickly. He first thought to reveal his identity and trust to his official character as a means of getting at the coveted document. But he remembered that telegrams were treated as confidential communications, not to be lightly shown even to inquisitive government officials. At that moment he looked down and his eye lighted on the little square blotter on which the second steward had dried his message. Fortunately it had been a few moments and the imprint of each word had been copied upon the porous surface. Without any further parleying he slipped the innocent looking blotter into his pocket, it required but a few moments to get into an adjoining washroom. By what seemed a miracle of chance no one else was in the apartment.

He hurried in front of a large mirror and employed a time honored device to discover the writing on the blotter. He written it could only be read backward, but by holding it in front of the mirror

the writing was reversed and appeared as it was originally inscribed on the telegram. It was somewhat blurred. The address was blotted out altogether. Some of the words could not be deciphered, but Barnes discovered enough to set his brain in a whirl. What he read was as follows:

"—ship Company."

"Am watched. Will be late. Be careful."

Barnes thrust the letter into his pocket and started for the door. He could scarcely repress a feeling of exultation, a desire to shout for joy. To him this imperfect copy of the telegram furnished a clue that might lead to big things. Tallman realized that he was suspected and had made all preparations for feeling the city.

The waiting room of the hotel was fairly crowded; but in spite of that fact the chief inspector immediately located the second steward. He was near the side door leading to the barroom, engaged in conversation with a shabbily dressed man who looked like a sailor. Tallman took a bank note out of his pocket and thrust it into the fellow's hand. The man smiled and bowed his thanks.

Barnes pulled out his watch and looked at it. It was five minutes of 3. He pushed his way over toward the telegraph booth with the intention of sending a message to Clancy. The operators were busy, and several men were standing writing messages. While the chief stood there irresolute, wondering what he should do, a stranger tapped him on the arm.

"Is this Chief Barnes?"

"That's my name."

"Well, a man on the sidewalk wishes to speak to you."

"Who is it?"

"I can't say, but you will know him by the fact that he is dressed in a long storm coat and is wearing a high silk hat."

"What does he want?"

"I don't know, but he says that it is a matter that vitally concerns you."

Barnes was about to make some further remark when his informant suddenly left him and slipped away in the crowd. The inspector was perplexed. His impulse was to ignore the message, but on second thought he felt that it might have some important bearing on the case he had on hand. So he made his way through the main door of the hotel and out into the street. At first he could not see anything of the individual who had been so briefly described to him. He was about to abandon

the idea of meeting this strange person when his eye lit on a tall man wearing a high silk hat and wrapped in a heavy storm coat. This must be the person who wished to speak to him. The man lounged about in an attitude of expectancy, as if he were awaiting the arrival of some one. Without hesitation Barnes rushed up and tapped the stranger on the arm. The man looked down at him with surprise.

"I am Barnes," said the inspector confidently.

"Are you?" retorted the other haughtily.

"I am."

The tall man, with impudent nonchalance, puffed away at the cigar he held in his mouth.

"Yes," persisted Barnes, "and if you have anything to say to me you will have to say it very quickly, for I am in a hurry."

The man stared at him. A look of annoyance overspread his face.

"Blast your impudence!" he exclaimed. "Why should I say anything to you?"

"Didn't you send for me?" asked the puzzled inspector.

"Certainly not."

"Who I was told—"

"Well, you were told wrong," interrupted the other, moving off; "and if you annoy me any further I'll call the police."

Suddenly it flashed on Barnes that the person who had sent him on this fool's errand was the shabbily dressed man he had seen in conversation with Tallman. He hurried into the hotel and looked in the barroom and in the washroom.

The second steward was gone. Chagrined at being duped so easily, Barnes started toward the wharf. He had lost both Tallman and the messenger boy. But he still had one more trick to play. It seemed a slender hope, but it stirred his professional pride.

When the chief reached the wharf he found Clancy and Forward seated on a log, gazing out at the lapping waters. The fog was gradually lifting, and the two young men, unaccustomed to such sights, were watching it with absorbed interest. It was as if a fair maiden had raised a dark veil and revealed her beautiful countenance. The reflection of the moon, shining upon the waters evoked a mass of luminous rays, which scintillated with each movement of the incoming tide.

"Anything in sight?" asked the chief, joining his two young friends.

"Only that old life preserver," laughed Clancy, pointing to a white circular object which bobbed up and down in the water with every ripple of the waves. Barnes pulled a pair of marine glasses from his pocket and, adjusting them to his sight, gazed at the floating object.

"A life preserver," he slowly spelled out. "It looks frayed and worn and some of the letters are almost gone."

"The Aetna; you're right," assented Clancy. "That's the boat that was wrecked at the mouth of the river about five years ago."

The chief took another look at the buoyant belt, which floated like a feather on the top of the glistening waters.

"Who'd a thought the relics of that wreck would be this river yet?"

The clock on an adjoining steeple struck four. Dashes of gray streaked

the darkness of the night here and there.

The great framework of the Vulture stood out like an immense skeleton on the water. The dim outlines of ferry houses and chimneys and high buildings on the other side of the river loomed up like grim silhouettes. The splash of oars was heard almost beneath the wharf where the three men were seated, and a row boat shot out into the open air.

"Hello! what's that?" cried the chief, his interest instantly aroused.

Clancy peered out at the solitary man in the boat. His face relaxed and he smiled.

"False alarm," he said. "It's only Jimmy Slack."

"And who may Jimmy Slack be?" inquired the chief, wrapping himself in his official manner.

"He runs a little joint up on Water street," replied Clancy; "sells second hand anchors, buoys, life preservers and a whole lot of other things used on our ships. The joke of it is he picks up half of his stuff in the river. He's a sort of scavenger about the docks."

While they were talking Mr. Jimmy Slack was rowing out to where the white life preserver was bounding up and down like an animated Punch and Judy. As he neared it the man poked out one of his oars, hooked the object in the center and pulled it into his boat. He looked about him leisurely for a moment, and then, dipping the oars into the water, he fastidiously back to the wharf. He slowly stepped back to a bit of moss covered piling. Going ashore, he threw the life preserver over his head, so that one part of it rested on his right shoulder and the other under his right arm, and marched gayly up the street.

During all of this time the chief was pulling away at a Pittsburgh stogie. He puffed and puffed until the weed was burned half way down. Clancy gazed at him nervously from under half closed eyelids. Suddenly the chief plucked the stogie from his mouth and tossed it into the water. He turned to his assistant.

"Take me to Slack's shop—in a hurry. I want to take a look at it."

Clancy, the laconic, asked no questions. He arose quickly and started along the wharf. They traipsed after him until Water street was reached. All three turned into the narrow thoroughfare, lined on each side with great brick buildings, giving the appearance of a great canyon. Here and there some low shack of a store-

doubling up his right fist, pounded vigorously on the door. Subdued sounds of voices came from within. The chief knocked a second time. While the sound of his blows was echoing on the crisp early morning air the door was cautiously opened out.

"What do you want?" piped a shrill voice.

Barnes never replied, but pushed his way roughly into the room, followed by Clancy and Forward. A gasping man lay on the floor spread a blanket of rone lay about the door and slippers hung from the ceiling. Mr. Jimmy Slack stood in the doorway, his face as white as a sheet, and anger alternating in his light blue eyes.

"Now that you're broken into my place," he cried, "I'd like to know what you want."

"You're very civil to customers," replied Barnes, irreverently.

"Customers?" echoed the river scavenger.

"Yes, customers," replied the old man in his smoothest tones. "I've never made a purchase."

"A fine hour for that," rejoined Slack, shrilly.

"Oh, but this is an emergency—and believe you are an emergency man."

"What do you want?" asked politely.

"A life preserver," blarneyed.

"I haven't any," said the river man doggedly.

"What's this?" cried the chief, and making a quick movement he pulled a piece of canvas from a bulbous pile of stuff in the corner of the room. All of a sudden he turned in that direction.

There, in all of its symmetrical beauty, lay the circular life preserver. "That's not for sale," cried the river man. There was fear in his eyes as he saw the chief's hand on the life preserver. "But I'll take it just the same," said Barnes, stooping down, picked up the round white object.

Barnes gave a snarl like a wild animal and grabbed the other side of the life preserver. There was a ripping sound as the rotten covering gave way, and a cork dust and excrement flew out in a cloud. Barnes, with a look of horror, stood there unable to move. A room. A heavy door came from the rear of the place was thrown open and the assistant of the Vulture stood on the threshold.

Barnes, his eyes glittering, but perfectly self possessed, bowed low.

"My dear Mr. Tallman, we greet you. Our lines seem to cross tonight. We've got no further. The second steward made a movement for his hip pocket. A glistering barrel of gold and a dim lamp light. Simultaneously the chief jumped forward and struck at the glowing object. There was a quick sharp report. When the smoke cleared away the chief was standing in a dazed, uninjured. Directly behind him a bullet was imbedded in the wall. The second steward was on his back on the floor with Clancy clutching viciously at his throat.

By the time the second steward and his accomplice were put behind the bars and the scene was placed in the safe of the custom house the sun had risen and the city was awake. Half an hour later the chief and his two companions were in the rooms overlooking Washington square.

"You had a close call," ventured Forward.

"I never had a closer one," said Barnes. "That bullet whistled very near."

Clancy was silent. The chief, looking at him, suddenly jumped up with a gasp of surprise. The next minute he had hot water and bandages and was washing the clothed blood from the right hand of his young assistant.

"It's only a scratch," smiled Clancy, feebly; "it will be all right in a day or so."

Barnes said nothing, but he pulled out a big red handkerchief and began blowing his nose with unnecessary vigor. Ten minutes later the assistant was sent home "to take a good long snooze."

The chief stood looking out of the window and watched Clancy as he hurried through the square. He seemed unconscious of the presence of Forward. His eyes remained glued on the rapidly disappearing form of his young assistant. Barnes rarely perked up emotion. Even now he merely sighed. Then, as if talking to himself, he said in a voice that was merely a whisper:

"And yet some people wonder why I love that boy."

Barnes made no response, but

room squatted in abject squalor between its imposing neighbors. They walked for five blocks and halted before a small wooden structure. Stracks of light shone from between the cracks in the door.

"Here it is," said Clancy.

Barnes made no response, but

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