

Stolen Honour—Part 3

by Frank McGinn

Suddenly a shot rang out. A man cursed and a woman screamed. The baby barked and the dog cried. From the servant's quarters came the babble of frightened voices. This was followed by the babble of a running brook, the Tower of Babel and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Still, Lord and Lady Bradley stared at one another silently.

Watching them through a crack in the ornately-carved sliding doors, Charles groaned softly. He knew from past experience that they could keep up this staring for hours. It was one of their favorite noble pastimes, a game called Look Buddy Straight in the Eye and Don't Flinch No Matter What. Charles' job was to supply loud distractions at irregular intervals until one of them cracked. He considered the whole thing a distasteful indication of the Bradley's relationship, childish yet squalid, but what could he do? Good lords were hard to come by and a butler without a lord was merely a doorman. Anyway sooner, or later Lord Bradley would burst into tears. That was how it always ended. Sighing inwardly and crossing his fingers for luck, Charles prepared the St. Valentine's Day Massacre tape.

Since Lord and Lady Bradley were distracted by the recent theft and its attendant complications, this round only lasted until about teatime. His senses assaulted by a combination of the San Francisco Earthquake and the Rape of the Sabine Women, a Dolby-Sensurround production of which Charles was justifiably proud, Lord Bradley cracked like the peanut he was and fled sobbing from the drawing room. Lady Bradley curled her lip scornfully after him and stalked triumphantly to the ornately-carved sideboard. Here she drained a dipper of scotch and soda from the cocktail bucket and grabbed a couple of pastrami sandwiches which, however, had the crusts got off in deference to her social position. Then she uncurled her lip and rang for Charles.

The obliging fatotum was fulsome yet formal when he entered. "Wonderful victory, modom," he said in his butler voice. "A magnificent display of perseverance in the face of pusillanimous poltroonery."

Lady Bradley coloured royally under this praise but, as blue did not become her, she soon stopped.

"Oh Charles, Charles, Charles..." she cried. As she spoke her regal bearing slipped as if on a banana peel. It tumbled away and in its place there was revealed a warm, passionate woman. Swiftly glancing around to be certain they were alone, she shut the windows, turned out the lights, put a bureau against the door and flung herself headlong into his arms. (Or armlong into his head, depending on where you were standing.)

"Oh Charles, Charles, Charles..." she cried again, pressing her burning cheek

against his warm, stiffly-ironed shirtfront. "You did it for us, didn't you?"

"Say what?" said Charles in his everyday, or, in the case of him and Lady Bradley, his every-night voice. He patted her gingerly on the top of her heaving curls but did not otherwise enter into the spirit of the embrace. Although a devil with the Ladies, to him it was all part of the fine art of butling. They expected his services, they got his services but his real passion was go-cart racing.

"Va-room! Var-oom!" he was inwardly crooning. "Clear the cookie!" He was trained to be impassive, however, and outwardly he remained calm. "I don't recall anything happening for us."

Lady Bradley shot him a suspicious glance and he hastily corrected himself. "Besides that, I mean. Hey, you were great, baby," he said automatically. Charles knew on which side his bread was buttered. Lady Bradley purred.

"It's no use pretending," she resumed wildly. "I know that it was you who stole the priceless Francesco della Bordella, knowing that you could sell it for a fortune before it was revealed that the painting was a forgery thus ruining Henry and causing him to shoot himself so that you could marry me and support me in the manner to which I am entitled. Oh you crazy, reckless fool, I accept."

"I assure you, honey-bunch..." began Charles, in the quavering tone he always used when discussing marriage or other lingering diseases, when suddenly the import of her speech sank in.

"Forgery!" he yelled. "You mean the Bordella that I... that is to say, the Bordella that was stolen... I mean, was the Bordella stolen?" he finished lamely.

A less infatuated observer than Lady Bradley might have been made suspicious by these words, and by the way Charles was hyperventilating and turning green while his eyes shifted furtively, his mouth twitched and he lit three cigarettes simultaneously. If they had not been all alone — but Hist! Was there a shadowy figure silhouetted against the curtained window? If there was, he may have been there for some time, long enough to have formed some very interesting opinions about the strange goings-on at the ornately-carved Bradley Hall. Or was it just the cat?

Meanwhile Charles had stopped gibbering and was framing some leading questions to ask his mistress-mistress, when there came a subdued tap on the barricaded door.

"I say, Alice, are you finished gloating yet?" came the timid squeak of Lord Bradley.

Instantly the adulterous pair sprang apart. From somewhere down around her knees Lady Bradley dragged up her imperious manner.

"That will be all, thank you Charles," she said loudly. "Coming, insect," she called to

her husband. Charles hurriedly straightened up the room, unlocked the door and strode past his lordship, somehow managing to bow his head while keeping his nose in the air.

"You may go, Charles," said Lord Bradley to the retreating servant's back. Then he edged into the room and confronted his wife.

"I say, dear," he began, with the air of a beggar looking for a swift kick. "What were you and Charles doing in here alone in the dark?"

"Developing some pictures," snapped Lady Bradley, who had socked back a quick dipper of gin and bitters and was her old self again.

"In the drawing room?" questioned Lord Bradley hesitantly, whining a little for emphasis.

"Okay, we were drawing pictures," said his helpmate fiercely. "Want to make something of it?"

"Oh no dear," said Lord Bradley with an audible gasp, as if he had been kicked in the slats. Lady Bradley withdrew her foot and he folded to the floor, bowing his head and making the sign against the Evil Eye. "Jolly clever of you both to be able to see so well in the dark."

Lady Bradley was checking this remark over for insolence, and deciding that she ought to let him have it again, just to be on the safe side, when Charles appeared again in the doorway.

"Another mysterious missive, m'lady," he intoned, indicating an envelope which reposed on the silver platter he carried in one, white-gloved, ornately-carved hand.

Lady Bradley gave a little start, then she reached for the letter. Lord Bradley gave a couple of false starts, then he too reached for the handwritten communique. But before either of them could get to it, a tall, balding figure materialized in the entranceway and snatched the piece of paper in question from the butler.

"I'll take that, thank you Charles," it spoke.

"Lord Cavendish!" shrieked Lady Bradley.

"Rutherford!" squeaked Lord Bradley.

"Sir!" protested Charles.

"No time for explanations," boomed Lord Cavendish, for, as the three had independantly verified, it was he. "This is a perilous race against a dangerous madman. Every second counts." And, counting under his breath, he advanced toward the fireplace and opened the note.

"I didn't know you were back, Rutherford old bean," said Lord Bradley. "Have you been here for some time?"

"I may have been," said the lordly detective with a knowing wink toward the reader. "But let's see what is written herein." He quickly scanned the sheet in his hand but, just as the others caught up with him, he appeared to stumble over a footstool.

"Oops," he said as he toppled earthward. Then "Suffering Christ!" he screamed as he

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