

The Panic at Pendergasts

"It's moving hard, Joseph," remarked Mrs. Pendergast. No response came from the depths of the Morris chair in which Mr. Pendergast was outstretched. Not that Mr. Pendergast was asleep—he would have scouted the very idea—but merely enjoying that delicious post-prandial snooze which to some becomes independent of the cares of the day have stolen Artilike away.

Mr. Pendergast, an attractive young woman of the large-eyed, ethereal blonde type, cast one reproachful glance at the good-looking miscreant whose name she bore, and returned to her novel. They had not been married very long, those two, and being of unexceedingly romantic temperament, the increasing tendency of her beloved Joseph to fall asleep immediately after dinner caused her much secret anguish of mind. It had been fully decided between them that they were to be lovers to the end of their days, and to be lovers meant—well, it certainly did not mean this. However, being timid as well as romantic, the injured wife said nothing, but, as on previous occasions, after that one accusing glance returned to her book, and in contemplation of the wrongs of "A Lady of Quality" forgot for the time being of her own.

The house of the Pendergasts stood in the midst of a extensive lawn on a recently opened suburban street, several blocks from the main thoroughfare. The thickly-falling snow muffled such sounds as might have come from the outside. Even Mattily, the dusky goddess of the frying pan, had ceased her wiled vocalism and dozed off with her feet in the oven.

But after a time Mrs. Pendergast was interrupted in the midst of that remarkable scene where the flamboyant Florida is assuring the love-stricken Earl, that whatever other shortcomings she may possess, she is "an honest thing," by the whirring of the electric bell. Mr. Pendergast also sprang into a sitting posture with a guilty start. Who could it be on such a night as this?

The ring was repeated, and a third, as of some heavy object set down upon the porch, was heard. The knocking and feet of Mattily made their reluctant way through the hall and two Afro-American voices were raised in lively controversy, ending in another thud, this time in the hall itself. A moment later the woman appeared at the library door, her ebony features flushed with the resentment that always accompanied any interruption of her personal one.

"Di man's done bring yer trunk, later Pendergast, en bows he must look with ye," said she, muttering as she turned away.

"A-trompin' an' en dirt into my all fur me to clean up, dis time night—scoundrel os nigger!"

"Trunk?" said Mr. Pendergast, rising with a protracted yawn. "What trunk, Elaine? Were you expecting one?"

"Why, no!" Mrs. Pendergast answered, absently. Then in a tone of dismay, "Oh, Joseph, if it should be Aunt Culpoper!"

"Lord!" exclaimed Mr. Pendergast, Aunt Culpoper, let it be said on a peaceful, was an impending catastrophe, likely to happen at any time. It was with a look of lively apprehension, therefore, that Mrs. Pendergast rose and followed her husband into the hall.

man, holding out the scrap of paper. "It's do 'revelous what do man what gins me do check done gim me. I not a p'ntman look do on Sehon street to read 'em off ter me, an' agin en Fourteen' street, on he showed me do was t'yer boss. Deed no did—I reckon it's all right. Mobbos some o' yer folks is comin' who yo ain't 'spectin'!"

Mr. Pendergast gingerly took the grimy paper from the man and held it to the light. His wife peeped curiously over his shoulder.

"W. J. is your name and address, Joseph, sure enough?" she exclaimed. "I done told yo so boss," said the old darky, in an injured tone.

"And, Joseph—the handwriting!" timidly began Mrs. Pendergast. "Oh, don't be idiotic, Elaine!" said Mr. Pendergast, taken with a suspicious glance. "Say, uncle, who gave you this address?"

"De gen'man whin' gim me do check on de money, boss." "And where was it?" "Tuen, seeing that the old man bes' go to look scared, he added, less sharply; "Come now, uncle, tell a straight story, and let's see if we can find out where the mistake is."

"Well, boss," began the old man, "I was a stannin' on Sehon' street wid ma push-cyart, 'bout six o'clock, I reckon, on up comes a man—"

"Colored or white?" interrupted Mr. Pendergast. "A kinder ginger-colored man wid specs on, en he gim me a check pin up on t'ole me ter go ter B. and O. station on git a trunk en take it do place writ on dat yer paper. En I did preznkly writ he tole me; but of I'd a 'sp'ishoned 'twas dat fur, en me do wney up hill, I wouldn't a done it for no quarter; en I sholy dose hope yo's gwine gim me on yo'self, b'ose I sholy was hard on de ole man," he added, benevolently.

"But it's a mistake, I tell you, uncle. The trunk doesn't belong here. There must be some other man of my name in the city." "But do number o' do house is writ on do paper, boss," persisted the old man.

"So it is!" admitted Mr. Pendergast. "Tours was a pause. Then Mr. Pendergast felt his arm seized in a convulsive grasp.

"Joseph Joseph!" came in an awful whisper from his wife. "You remember that dreadful trunk mystery in the Yellow Journal last winter?"

"Noneuse!" said Mr. Pendergast, the while a curious creeping sensation made itself felt in his spinal column. "Don't be silly! Here, man!" he said, sternly, to the bewildered old darky, "this trunk doesn't belong to anyone in this house. Take it away from here, 'But what'll I take it to, boss?"

"Back where you got it—on to the dump—any old place. Or keep it yourself. I don't care what you do with the confounded thing, so you get it out of here. Here's a quarter for you. Come out with it, quick!"

At this juncture attention was drawn to Mattily, who until now had been a mute, but curious spectator of the scene. With rolling eyes and aghast cheeks she stood pointing at the spot where the trunk was standing. With one accord all eyes followed hers, to where from beneath the trunk a crimson stream was making its slow way across the floor.

"Stop where you are!" "Too late," said the man. "You've got the old man all right, you say?" "Looked in the better pantry," said Mr. Pendergast.

"Here, you, Mattily, come out of there," he then shouted through the kitchen door. "You must run quick for an officer."

"Who, me?" wailed Mattily from within. "Naw, indeed, Mr. Pendergast! I ain't gwine throo no hall ter git no officer!"

"You can go out the back way, then, you confounded idiot!" shouted Mr. Pendergast. "Go on, I tell you, quick!"

"Oh, Lawd, Alister Pendergast, please don't scold me! I see dat skinned I can't walk a step, 'deed en 'deed I can't!" pleaded the woman.

Mr. Pendergast was in despair, rendered all the more intense by renewed cries from his wife, who continued to beseech him as one already convicted of murder in the first degree.

"All right, then," said Mr. Pendergast, on reflection; "come and stay with Mrs. Pendergast while I go for an officer."

"Oh, Joseph, you aren't going to leave me alone in the house with that awful thing!" promptly interposed his wife. "I shall certainly do on good if you do!"

Renewed hysterics on the part of Mrs. Pendergast. Renewed groans on the part of Mattily.

"Mattily, if you don't come out here instantly," shouted Mr. Pendergast, in desperation. "I'll—I'll bleark open this door and lock you into the pantry with the man and the trunk, too! Do you hear?"

Thereupon the door was reluctantly opened and the hapless Mattily tremblingly emerged.

Having by this time reached—and passed—the limits of masculine consideration for female sensibility, Mr. Pendergast picked up the limp form of his wife, bore it into the library and deposited it on a couch, thrust Mattily into the room after her, and dealt to their united pleadings, returned to the hall. There he seized his hat and a police whistle that he had laughingly presented to his wife soon after their removal to this quiet suburb, and with a shrinking glance at the red stream which had now broadened into a dreadful pool, rushed into the street.

For a moment he stood looking about him in hopes to discover some chance pedestrian whose aid he might claim, but not a human form was in sight. Nor where there any neighbors within reasonable distance, and Mr. Pendergast therefore made his way as hastily as possible through the blinding snow toward the main street.

During the five minutes' walk his mind swiftly reviewed the situation. He was not an imaginative man, nor one easily upset, but the thought of what that trunk might and undoubtedly did contain caused cold drops to start from his brow. It looked as if one of those terrible crimes that every now and then startle the community had again been committed, but why he, a quiet, law-abiding citizen, should have been selected out of a population of a quarter of a million people to be made a sharer in any disgrace whatever in the notoriety attached to such a crime passed his comprehension.

He could only conjecture that his name had been chosen from the city directory on account of his residence being at a distance from the centre of things, thus giving the malefactor time to escape from justice. No doubt the ginger-colored man with the glasses was the chief criminal, and was by this time miles away from the city. Of course there would be no great difficulty, Mr. Pendergast felt, in proving his own innocence, but time it was immensely annoying, and besides the prominence into which his modest name would be dragged he dreaded the consequences to Mrs. Pendergast. The situation was nothing less than terrible.

Hastening his footsteps, Mr. Pendergast finally reached the corner where his street joined the thoroughfare, and blow a shrill blast on his whistle. To his intense relief there was an almost immediate response, and the unusual circumstance of not one, but two, policemen being on hand when wanted made itself manifest as their brawny forms loomed through the intervening veil of snow and hurried toward him.

Mr. Pendergast took no time in narrating what had taken place on the three hastened toward his residence.

"I saw the nigger with his push-cart, myself," said one of the officers, "and read the address off for him, sure enough, just as he told you. You've got the old man all right, you say?" "Looked in the better pantry," said Mr. Pendergast.

Entering the hall, the two officers examined the trunk with professional keenness.

"Blood, sure enough!" said one of them, stooping over the gory pool a moment.

He straightened his ponderous figure and eyed, first his colleague, then Mr. Pendergast, his expressionless countenance quite unmoved.

"Could his heavy for his size," said the other officer, holding the trunk by one handle. He was a keen-eyed man with a face whose normal look was one of sterner. Even now he seemed incapable of viewing the situation with proper seriousness. His twinkling eyes darted from one face to the other and thence to every object within sight, almost morrily, before meeting the stolid gaze of his colleague.

Meantime, Mrs. Pendergast, whose curiosity got the better of her nerves, came out of the library, followed closely by Mattily.

"Isn't it awful!" she remarked, tearfully.

The officers of the law looked at her. Number One with a non-committal glare, Number Two with a reassuring grin.

Then they looked at each other again. "We'll have to take him in charge, I reckon, eh?" said Number One.

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ing hands filled with some thick crimson substance. "Don't you see?" he shouted between bursts of laughter. "It's—oh, Lord, it's too good! It's—it's—damned preposterous!" And it was damned preposterous—the bottom of the trunk was full of it, mingled with fragments of broken jars.

It was some time before order was restored.

"But there's one thing to be cleared up yet," said Mr. Pendergast, finally. "How on earth did he get my address?"

"That's so," said the big officer, looking puzzled.

"Say, Prouty, let me see that paper again," said Officer Number Two. "By George!" he cried, after examining it a moment. "If here ain't another address on the other side! J—n—Jenny, J—n—Jackson, That's it, Jenny Jackson, twenty-five hundred and nine Eleventh street. There you are! We've been lookin' at the wrong side of the paper all the time, see?"

"Wall, Lawd!" said the old darky, who since the denouement had miraculously revived. "I member now de man which gim me do check (dis my com'pin' 'bout 'Loven street, en Jackson, sho' 'nuff!"

"Well, by Jove!" cried Mr. Pendergast. "I begin to understand the whole thing now! The ginger-colored man is my husband! We were needing a laundry, and I asked him to send me one, and gave him my name and address. He wrote the address for the push-cart man on the back of the same scrap of paper. There's the whole thing in a nutshell!"

"It certainly is one on you, sir!" remarked Officer Number Two, jocularly.

There was a general laugh in which Mr. Pendergast rather sheepishly joined.

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