

The Moll Buzzer

by Samuel J. Lewis

THE Monday morning horde of women milled and volleyed around the bargain square in the sub-basement of the People's Emporium.

Above the eager heads and flopping hats of those nearest the firing line, signs lured and beckoned those back in the ruck of the bargain-hunting army. "Was 75¢.—Now 25¢." "Worth \$1.00—Choice 19¢." True, half the shoppers in the rear guard did not know what it was all about; but clearly it was worth risking an eye, an ear, or a switch to learn.

Probably shirt-waist transparencies were on display; it might be new-fangled mouse-traps, or bed, dresser, or corset-covers. But the printed counter-tags called and urged as would an enemy's battle-flags, and the assault flowed, was repulsed, ebbed, and flowed again.

In the trenches within the square, flushed and perspiring girls poised their pencils like bayonets, valiantly withstanding each attack.

Some went down, crushed and breathless, before carefully planned sorties: only to spring back to the fray with challenging shrieks of—"Two for you, lady?" "Cash or charge?" and "Bought by self?"

One militant eagle, goaded by hopeless desperation, pummeled an obstructing wren who blocked the path to victory.

The eagle struck with heavy shopping-bag, but the wren retaliated with an elbow thrust straight at the eagle's jugular.

The eyes of another quick-saler suddenly flamed with battle's lurid light. With a screaming babe held high above her head as though she were about to hurl a deadly hand-

grenade, she executed a brilliant forward pass, crying:

"Take your kid, Annie; I want some myself!" and, empty handed, surged into the midst of the awful riot.

Floor-walkers skirted the crowd, harrying and jeering the buyers on to fresh atrocities against the weary trench-holders. Cash-girls, hair flying, eyes staring, weaved and threaded and catapulted like powder monkeys, saucing here, scratching there, and biting yonder.

Finally, when a grim-visaged patriot seized a garment and waved it aloft as a banner of defiance, only to see a sleeve torn from it by one of the defied, a floor-walker remarked to a companion in crime:

"It's a great day for the Emporium!" And it was.

Also a great day for Moll Hencher.

Moll fluttered and pecked through the crowd like a small and scrawny mother hen, much to the sniffing and sometimes more vociferous and ribald disgust of the women. For Moll was a man—a short, squat, oily, sallow-faced, derby-hatted and coat-buttoned individual, but a man nevertheless.

And, pray, what was a man—and especially one with a dinky market-basket on his arm—doing in a place where chemises, hosiery, garters or other unmentionables and unnoticeables might be on exhibition and sale?

But Moll assailed with the fiercest, advanced with the bravest, crawled and squirmed forward with the sneakiest.

It was too much. The women almost gave up brow-beating the salesladies to

tongue-lash his cringing male anatomy.

“My pocketbook! It’s gone! You—you wretch—you’ve got it!”

The cry of a female in distress echoed through Emporium aisles. A gaunt arm flipped above the heads, and an open shopping bag, hairpins, powder rag and handkerchief flying, plopped down on the Moll’s derby, denting and crushing it until his ears stood at right-angles with his skull.

“My pocketbook! Give it up, thief! I felt him jerk my bag! Take that—and that! Police! Don’t let him get away!”

The words and blows engulfed Hencher as a verb-avalanche and fist-tornado combined.

He expostulated, fumed and denied while he struggled in the grip of bony but strong fingers. He looked furtively around for a chance of flight, as other women, snatching anxiously at their own belongings, drew back in dismay.

Floor walkers, cash girls, and the more intrepid of the passers through other aisles closed in. The looted lady again blew up with a loud report.

“He has my purse—the skinny wretch! Red outside, black inside”—she was telling of her pocketbook, not the Moll, although the description would have fitted either—“and it had five dollars and eighty cents!”

“Are you sure of your man, madam?”

The voice was impressive, and the question came in solemn and judicial manner from a tall, sleek, flashily attired man who had been halted on his walk through an adjacent aisle by the first cry.

He had pushed through and taken a place at the right of Hencher—between that gentleman and the bargain shambles. As he put his query he twisted a heavy watch chain with one hand and oratorically waved another on which a great diamond sparkled imposingly.

“Yes, are you quite certain?” peevishly

asked a floor walker, showing in his tone that he was not vastly in love with this diversion in Emporium festivities.

“Sure? Of *course* I am!” splattered the exasperated lady. “Fools! Don’t I know when my pocketbook’s gone? I felt his skinny hand. He’s got it! Search him—go through the beast!”

“But he looks like a nice homebody,” insisted the prosperous stranger, his black mustache raising and parting in a placating smile. “A regular Mr. Gentleman Flat-Dweller out shopping for the good wife.”

“All bosh! That silly basket—more bosh! What’s a man doing here, anyway?” She eyed the Moll’s defender belligerently. “Search him!”

Hencher gulped and wheezed as if about to enter a few remarks in his own behalf, when the stranger, still sitting in judgment, interrupted:

“Well, madam; if you’re so sure of your ground, will you please pass upon the ownership of that red purse—on the counter, there—among those—er—those goods?”

“Mine!” exclaimed the shopper, grabbing the article from where it was partially hidden and quickly assuring herself that the five dollars and eighty cents was undiminished. “But I felt that fellow crowd me. He tugged at my bag, too. What’s a man doing here, I’d like to know? Serves him right. Skinny men! Pooh!”

The maddened bargain-hunters closed in; the floor walkers were hustled away; the bayonet wielders, again on the defensive, parried and thrust and stabbed, and Moll Hencher, basket on arm and crestfallen derby on ears, ambled miserably down an aisle, with the elegant stranger as pilot and preacher.

“You, Dave Hencher! Still a moll-buzzer, I see!”

“Well, Platt, what’s a gink to do? You gotta get along,” whined the Moll, hands deep in pockets and basket trailing like some new

style of wicker-bustle. "I gotta live, ain't I?"

"That's obvious," sneered his critic. "But this time you came close to living off the State for a while. However, I see you recognized me."

"Reco'nize you? I'd reco'nize you in—well, in hotter places than a moll-rush to a bargain-counter. How'd y' turn the trick, Platt? I thought I was gone up th' river—me again fer stir!"

"I just fell back on the old stuff." explained Platt, smiling over his own accomplishment and the unspoken praise in the Moll's words. "I happened to be in the store on business with one of the department heads. I heard the baying of the hounds and recognized you as the one up the tree."

"I took the leather—you still call them leathers, don't you?—from your coat-pocket and slipped it onto the counter, just like that. But you—still a moll-buzzer, after fifteen years! Still preying on women! The lowest of thieves! Why don't you try second-story work, stealing door-mats—of something dignified?"

"Yes, still a moll-buzzer!" blurted Hencher. "Tell me what else I c'd do, will you? Ain't the bulls all hep t' me? Ain't it 'move on' all th' time? Get away f'om here an' hot-foot f'om there? Ain't it once a dip allus a dip with th' bulls, an' ain't a moll-buzzer, just 'cause he frisks women's handbags an' pockets, trun out by th' crooks an' yeggs who t'ink they're a bit higher?"

"Oh, I knew the gang wouldn't have much use for one of your kind," assured Platt, "but I didn't know the police were barking so close to your heels. Have you done your time?"

"Barkin' is good, but bitin' would be better," wailed the Moll, bringing up on a corner when it seemed that his benefactor had gone about as far as he cared to with one so notorious. "Meb-be not in this town th' bulls ain't so keen on me, but in other places—gee! An' certain I've done my bit. Two years—five

years."

Then, as if comparisons might help his weak case: "But you've done a stint 'r two yerself."

"Only one, Dave; let me correct you," protested Platt, grinning in an indulgent and superior way, and sizing up Hencher's shabby and shiny suit, which did not bear close inspection, although at a distance he might have passed for the loving husband and father out to pick up a week's bargains in groceries.

"That was the only time, Dave—the one you helped me out of," he continued. "And it was because of your aid on that occasion that I took a chance and helped you this morning. But I must be moving, Dave. Due at the office, you know."

"Wait a minute, Platt—just a minute," pleaded the Moll, practically unscrewing the derby in his efforts to get it off and fashion it into a less maudlin shape. "Gimme a tip, old scout. What's yer lay now? Y' look some genteel fer fair. Iron lid, tin shirt, b'iled vest, spitty-spats an' shiner shoes. My-o, Platt! Wise me up"

"It isn't a line, Dave," answered Platt, pausing and turning back. "At least no line that you would know anything about. I simply branched off the old road. For fifteen years I've been decent and honest, dealing with decent and honest folk. It was a new and thick leaf I turned over. I'd advise you to do the same. A home and wife and children on one side, Dave. On the other—well, there's stir and the long time. Think it over."

"Huh! A swell chance I'd have, Platt, with th' bulls gorin' me on one side an' th' gang harpoonin' me on t'other. No use!"

Nevertheless Hencher gazed enviously at the silk hat, perfectly groomed figure, white vest, gray spats and patent-leather shoes as he added:

"It'd be a fine hick of a boob who'd give me a show now. Wouldn't it? Me—pickin' women's pockets an' doin' penance up

river fer fifteen years—me!”

“*I* might be the boob,” declared the other, “and—I believe I will—for the sake of that—well, because I don’t think you got started right. Any man can make good, if he’ll work. But it isn’t Platt any more, Dave. It’s Perrin—Robert J. Perrin instead. Here’s my card. If you’ll come to my office in, say, an hour—better not come in with me—we’ll talk it over. In the mean time ditch the basket and cut the moll-buzzing.”

A convenient alley received into its flinty bosom the undesirable wicker-work, and Hencher took a few turns around the neighborhood, thinking over his own career and what he had come to, as he compared it with the sunnier, happier paths of the one who had been Bob Platt.

He had come upon Platt in an up-State workhouse, where they were both doing their six months’ bit as vagrants.

Really they were not vags, but vagrancy covers a multitude of sins—and sinners.

A robbery had been committed; the police dragnet had been thrown out, and both Hencher and Platt had been hauled in with the greater and lesser fishes.

Neither was guilty, and both had money in their pockets; yet for being birds of passage—without nest or visible means of support—they had assisted the county in its road-building efforts by making little rocks out of big ones.

But only for three months. Then Hencher had proposed to Platt, his rock-pile buddy, because he was the human anchor at the other end of his leg-chain, that they escape through the simple expedient of crawling into a thicket while a somnolent guard was taking his afternoon siesta, knocking off the rusted and ill-fitting shackles with a rock-hammer and walking away.

Their scheme had miscarried only when Platt, in nervous haste, wounded his

ankle more than the iron bracelet.

Hencher, already released, had refused to desert his injured comrade; had supported and half carried him for miles to a safe retreat in the underbrush of a ravine; had foraged provisions over the countryside for three days until Platt was in condition to go his way.

There had been no pursuit—the officials evidently figuring it a good riddance, and the pair had separated, journeying in almost opposite directions.

That was fifteen years ago. Since then Hencher had done his seven years in two installments.

With women always as his victims, he had come to be known as Moll Hencher; his picture adorned several rogues’ galleries, and on this morning, after the long struggle, he could only boast of the clothes on his back—worth in the aggregate about twelve dollars; the few coins in his pockets, a poor room in the lower town, and a reputation which would get him ten years, if he ever showed his nose to a criminal judge again.

A scant fortune, of which he did not boast—the entire fruits of criminality and petty dipping—was embraced within the narrow limits of an account in a side-street savings bank. This bank-book, having across its face a carefully chosen alias, and holding in its folds a credit for three hundred and twenty-five dollars, was concealed under a corner of the carpet in his room.

With the crook’s usual caution. Dave had managed to provide a fee for a mouthpiece, or attorney, against a day when he might be compelled, in spite of his wriggling, jostling ways, to face that criminal judge.

His pursuits took him to store-sales, matinees, concerts, into the crowded streets, to busy corners, on street-cars—to all places where women might congregate.

He seldom buzzed a male. Women were safer, more easily outrun—took jostling

more amiably than did men.

The game could hardly be called profitable, but the wolves at his door apparently drove away the dogs of the law, for he had not seen the inside of a jail in eighteen months—nor the inside of a first-class restaurant, either.

It would never do, and the Moll knew it. To eat into that nest-egg for the mouthpiece, whose spieling might be needed any day.

With the Bob Platt of other years things must be quite different.

The department store episode had brought him out of the past. He was clad in much purple and fine linen.

The “iron hat” which had aroused the Moll’s jealousy, while it might constitute an unpardonable offense in a pickpocket’s eyes, nevertheless bespoke a considerable plutocracy. The perfect fitting and tight-buttoned coat hinted at an august and capable checkbook beneath—a book that would pass much more readily than the puny thing in the inner lining of Dave’s blowzy coat.

And the diamonds on the hands and in the necktie—

“Why, th’ guy sports more ice th’n a rink,” soliloquized the Moll. “He sparks like a arc lamp!”

Platt—or Perrin—must be doing pretty well! Honest ways paid, if you had the wit to get by and the brain to put it over.

And yet Platt had been a crook himself, or, at least, Hencher thought so. He had never been quite sure until the bargain-counter scene.

The dexterity with which his old prison mate had extracted the leather from his kick and concealed it among the flubdub on the counter was convincing. It was a cinch! Platt had certainly been a dip in the old days—or he never could have pulled such a flooey.

And now look at him! Why, the old jossler probably lolled in his own gas-bucker

and bullied a shover. And he could go around to the bull-pen and hoot at the cops.

No fanning of *him* by cheap peelers and town constables. It all came from the honest lay—from the respectable road.

Well, maybe for the sake of the old days, that back-door foraging and self-denial, Platt would wise him to how the road was traveled.

He would go through with the thing, anyway. If he could do no better, he might con Platt into kicking in with a few iron men for his general maintenance, or he might pipe the line-up around the offices with an eye to a little transom work and desk jimmying.

But the mere thought of such desperate criminality made the rabbit-hearted Moll sicken with terror.

Hencher slunk past the uniformed attendant at the door of the office building, and tried to efface himself in a far corner of the elevator on his ride to the twelfth floor indicated on the Perrin business card.

He had a deep-rooted aversion to uniforms, even on elevator pilots. Blue or gray, with braid and brass-buttons, always seemed tuned to the jingling of keys and clanging of locks.

Besides, the elevator door had a way of snapping like a greedy steel jaw—the jaw of stir, for instance.

A few beads of sweat stood out on Hencher’s mere sample of a forehead, and he jammed the low-crowned derby still further over his eyes. He was far from happy as he sidled and edged along the corridor and eased through a door on which was printed in letters of impressive size:

ROBERT J. PERRIN & CO.
Investment!

“Ah, right on time, Mr. Henshaw, I see,” smiled Perrin or Platt, speaking over the head of a stenographer at whose side he had

been standing when the Moll came in, blinking at the opulent array of counters, cages, desks, filing cabinets, clerks, and office boys.

Perrin put a significant emphasis on the "Henshaw," implying that the Moll-rose by another name would be much sweeter.

"Glad to see you, Henshaw! Henry, show the gentleman into my private office. I'll be with you in a moment, Mr. Henshaw."

Inside and alone, Hencher gaped at his surroundings.

The easy chairs, the directors' table, the desk as big as a concert piano, the rugs, hat-racks—everything modern and expensive got under his tough hide. What a vast difference there was in all this from the meager pilfering of housemaids and jostling of women already burdened with bundles and babies!

A settlement worker had once earnestly endeavored to chisel into the Moll's flinty head the admonition that "Honesty is the best policy."

He had insisted in his dull defense that if men were only honest because it was the best policy, they were not necessarily honest at heart. It seemed to him that merely being upright through fear of the law or public censure did not constitute genuine rectitude.

Had he been writing that phrase he would have put it. "Honesty is the right policy."

But now he was convinced that probity, integrity and fairness paid dividends. There were financial and moral gains not to be overlooked. Chicanery, deception, theft, and fraud were the handmaidens of poverty and misery.

Why, the whole thing was exemplified in the personalities of Dave Hencher, thief, and Robert J. Perrin, broker. They had started over different paths from the same chain-gang.

Both were thirty-eight years old, and—now look at them!

Hencher was hard-pressed to dispose of his derby. It did not loom as a suitable decoration on the office rug, nor on a near-by chair, and he would not have crossed that room to one of the hat-racks—no, not for a moll's hand-bag full of greens!

So he laid the greasy head-gear on the open desk, and in doing so his eyes bugged out at sight of a thin stack of bills beneath a round glass paperweight.

"A plant! Framin' fer me, eh?" He sneered as he, noted another door evidently leading out into the corridor. "Thinks I'll fall fer th' small bunch o' lettuce. Nix on that! Gee, if th' crib's worth anyt'ing, it'll do better th'n that!"

For five minutes, plenty of time to make a getaway, he sat eying the money and tilting in his chair. Then Perrin came in breezily, nonchalantly tucked the bait in a vest-pocket, handed over a fat cigar which looked to have cost about as much as the buzzer's shoes, lit one himself, and began:

"Now, we'll not be disturbed, Dave, so listen me out, please. You don't appear overfed, overdressed or over-prosperous. Evidently you haven't done well. That's the fault of your system. It doesn't pay."

"So it don't, Platt—Mr. Perrin." The Moll looked around apprehensively as if large ears might have heard his break. "I got two years wunst fer friskin' ninety cents f'om th' pocket of a dame that looked like she'd be good fer ninety thousand."

"That's my point," continued Perrin, grandly flicking the ash from his cigar with a bejeweled finger and daintily lifting a lint speck from his lapel. "I never exactly tried it: merely fell in with a crooked lot for a time—and you helped me out.

"Now, I might contend that this morning's stunt squared matters, but really I ran no risk. No one would have suspected Robert J. Perrin, even without the pocketbook trick. Why, I number among my clients at

least two dozen women heads of departments in that store.

“Now, I’ve decided, if you’re willing, of course, to give you a chance at the straight road—the one I have traveled. It may be just a whim, but it’s going through. The thing pays in dignity, respectability—and funds. When you arrive you are looked up to and esteemed; your name becomes a great asset.

“However”—as an afterthought—“speaking of names, I think the Henshaw of the outer office will be better than the Hencher of the past.”

“Anyt’ing’ll be better th’n th’ moll-buzzer,” gulped Hencher. “It’s a snide monniker, Mr. P-Perrin. But how d’ye know I won’t snitch on you fer that past yer speakin’ of?”

“Oh, I hadn’t given it a thought. But no one would believe you, Dave. You could blat it from the Battery to the Bronx and you couldn’t get one rise a day, although you might get a fall-back for blackmail.

“However, I’m expecting you to be grateful, thankful. You’ll be a sort of helper around the office—whatever you can do at the start. Your pay will be ample, sufficient. You’ll get a decent room and decent clothes.

“I could do the story-book act and! hand you over the money”—tapping the vest-pocket loftily—“but I prefer to see you earn it. Sometimes I may give you little confidential jobs, but”—shaking an admonitory finger—“no moll-buzzing. We have a dozen or so girl employees and hundreds of callers—mostly women—every day.

“Don’t let the hand-bags or other articles of virtu get you down. Keep straight, follow me, do as I have done, and some day David Henshaw may be quite as prosperous and well-to-do as one Dave Hencher was notorious and ne’er-do-well.”

Perrin’s delicately manicured finger pushed a button and something in a uniform bounced through the door. Hencher, gurgling

his surprise, started to his feet, but slumped back into his chair when he perceived it was only an office boy.

“Henry,” explained Perrin, “this is Mr. David Henshaw, who will take charge of the letter-press and the circular and pamphlet room. You will show him what there is to be done.”

As the Moll gathered his soiled chapeau under his arm and departed from the philanthropic Perrin’s presence, he leaned over and whispered:

“Gee. Platt—I can’t get hep t’ these uniforms! I t’ought you’d called th’ harness bulls.”

For ten days the Moll, in his incompetent, haphazard and low-browed way, puttered around the offices of Robert J. Perrin, investment broker. But what he lacked in efficiency he made up in zeal.

Each morning he was waiting in the corridor when the door was opened. At night he almost had to be evicted by the janitor.

Either his soul was in his efforts or he hoped to find himself at some time the sole occupant of the rooms, with principal eye to the cashier’s cage and vault.

The latter seemed to occupy most of his thoughts. He gazed rapidly at the important looking books and the more satisfactory heaps of currency which disappeared into it of evenings and reappeared next morning, the books to be scattered over desks while the cash was arranged in imposing stacks on the glass counter of the cage.

Once the cashier remonstrated with him.

“Your place is in the mailing room, Henshaw. There is nothing around the vault that could possibly interest you except the combination—and that’s only known to Mr. Perrin and myself.”

“I wasn’t pipin th’ crib.” grumbled Hencher, falling back on his old jargon.

Then, as the cashier moved away with

a smirk at his own low wit:

“Th’ old josser! Poof fer him—he wears cuffs!”

After the first week the Moll blossomed forth in cheap but gaudy improvements.

With Perrin as a model, he went in for a tin-shirt; he installed a white piping in the collar of his vest; a pair of gray spats concealed much of his decrepit shoes. His suit was pressed, and he affected an article which looked more like a hat than the sad-eyed derby which he consigned to a trash-can.

He had the fringe of mousy hair harvested from around his ears, and three shaves grew where one had sufficed before.

Really the Moll, at small outlay, was arriving with a bound; and Perrin, rather grandiloquently though, complimented him on his neater appearance.

One afternoon, while observing the results of his work at a letter-press, he spelled his way through several sentences of an outgoing communication.

The Moll’s early education had been somewhat neglected—his father hovering too close to a corner saloon, while his mother, in her turn, had hovered too close to an eternally active washtub. This had not made for classpins, but Dave, after a fashion, could bludgeon and blast his way through plain, typewritten English.

And so he read:

DEAR MADAM:

We note what you say about the investment of two thousand dollars made two years ago, with your statement that it has brought no dividends as yet. In reply we wish to assure you that extensive development work on the properties in question has cut down the net profits far beyond a dividend paying point.

However, such improvements have been economically and ably installed and are real and permanent assets to the stockholders.

While the stock has depreciated greatly since you invested—and will hardly pay dividends within the

next few years—we can say, speaking for the directors and not on our own responsibility, of course, that—

Hencher walked over to a stenographer, who seemed the most amiable of the office force because she had nodded pleasantly each morning, and asked:

“What is this t’ing, anyway, miss?”

“Oh, the letter?” holding out her hand for it. “You are to make two copies, Henshaw.”

“Yeh, I know about th’ letter, miss. I mean this t’ing.” He waved his hand to include the Perrin quarters, file room, vault, and private offices. “You know—this dump.”

“Why, an investment office, Henshaw,” the lady smiled indulgently, wondering where Perrin had found what appeared to be only a simple, unsophisticated worker.

“Who invests, miss?” Henshaw leaned two yellow fists on the desk and peered at her from a pair of dark eyes sunk in sallow cheeks.

“Anybody with money, I suppose.” Then, returning to her work, “Why don’t you ask Mr. Perrin? Or maybe you’d better not. I don’t think he’d like your cross-examination.”

At another time he read almost through a sheet which ran:

MADAM:

We have learned from the Big Brother Insurance Company that you will receive within the next few days five thousand dollars as insurance following the sad death of your husband. We knew him in life, and are certain that were he here to-day we need only refer to him concerning our business standing and resources.

Realizing that you will be looking for permanent and profitable investment, we solicit your consideration of—

There followed a glowing eulogy of the very business properties against which the former investor’s complaints had been aimed.

Even the dwarfed intellect of the Moll

could embrace the fact that, while one woman had lamented a paucity of returns from her money, the Perrin agency was still actively engaged in crowding the same stock onto others at a fancy figure, insisting that it would pay amazingly.

Thereupon the Moll became even more inquisitive, certainly more interested in the money which fell into the vault in currency flakes and was carted to the bank in currency drifts.

He opened letters as he had once opened hand-bags, and pried into their contents quite as eagerly as if they were leathers which he was examining in the privacy of a convenient alley. And for one of such shallow brainpan, he learned much, even while he kept away from the traps of small financial bait which Perrin and the cashier, who evidently acted on instructions, frequently set for him.

He was not to be tempted by petty cheese. He knew they were trying him, and he also knew that if he decided to grab it would be at dollars instead of pennies.

The two facts that soaked in deepest were that few men came to the cashier's window and few letters went forth to men, unless it might have been to attorneys who had protested in behalf of clients.

Generally—almost always—the visitors were women—women of a certain shabby and somber black, with careworn, sorrowful faces and eyes that looked out as through a constant, tearful mist.

Also the printed circulars in the mailing room sent pleas to investing women rather than to men, telling of wise ways in which to invest insurance moneys, inheritances, the savings from salaries earned in stores, offices, workshops, and even kitchens. The addressing machine, at which the Moll labored much of the time, contained the title of Miss or Mrs. a dozen times where it held a Mr. once.

At intervals, too, the Moll had heard words other than friendly at the cashier's window, and on several occasions from Perrin's inner office had leaked damp sounds as of tears and sobby protestations. But the others of the force seemed to have no ears, so the Moll did not worry his head greatly, although he did shake it often enough and vigorously.

On the afternoon of his tenth day Hencher was busy sealing and stamping some of Perrin's private mail. The work was being done under the watchful eye of the boss, who had taken a keen and very secret interest in the preparation of the letters and in the list of people to whom they were to go.

"This is a private drag, Dave," Perrin explained. "I don't want the 'company' to know of it."

Hencher had never seen the "company" alluded to on the door plate, although he had understood the word to apply to a wealthy citizen who came rarely to the office and was interested in other concerns of similar nature.

"I'm putting it through myself as a side-line," ran on Perrin. "I expect you to keep quiet. I can't always trust the stenographers and the others to do that. Some way, I fancy they'd bite me if I ever permitted them to grow sharp teeth."

"Aw, I'm no snitch," mumbled the Moll from over a stamp-glued tongue. "Either way, it ain't no time off my term."

The door opened with a pop and a woman came hurriedly into the inner office. Her face was flushed as from the excitement of some daring deed. A black veil was pushed back over the brim of a black hat. A shiny dress, inexpensive and in a past style, covered her scant figure.

Black gloves and shoes made her a veritable woman in black, except for the color of her cheeks and the gray flash from her eyes.

Perrin half leaped from his chair, his

face red as the carnation he persistently sported in his lapel. Controlling the mingled anger and frustration which showed in his eyes, he greeted her affably enough.

"Why, Mrs. Erhardt, good afternoon! Did the boy show you in?" The last with just a taint of rebuke.

"He did not, Mr. Robert J. Perrin & Co.!" snapped the visitor, going at once into battle. "I walked in without any boy. I've cooled my heels outside, with a grinning boy staring at me, the last time I intend to."

"Very well, Mrs. Erhardt; we needn't get excited," calmed the suave Perrin. "I didn't know you had been refused admission, I can assure you. Henshaw, you may leave the letters for a while."

"Let the man stay," ordered the truculent Mrs. Erhardt. "He looks honest enough. It will do me good to see one honest male around."

"This will never do," smiled the broker, nervously motioning Dave back to his task. "Now, what is the trouble, my dear Mrs. Erhardt?"

"Just this, Mr. Perrin—and don't 'dear' me. I've been here four times—yes, half a dozen—to find out why I never have received any returns from that precious stock you coaxed and cajoled me into buying. And not once have I been allowed in this office until I opened that gate, pushed the boy aside, and came in.

"Now I want to know, and I'm going to wait for the information. You and your fine-worded letters! I'd be willing to guess that man over there—the fellow with the honest face—is mailing some of them out right now."

Hencher's cheeks took on a faint salmon color. Blushing was not his strongest point, but he knew the woman had spoken the truth. The letters were being sent to the nearest female relatives of a score of men who had been killed in a building collapse and on whose claims the contracting firm had decided

to settle.

"You know very well," the visitor pursued, "that your letters promised me big dividends. And you know it was the only money I had to support my children. You said you knew my husband and wanted to help me. You have been a tremendous help, I must say! Two and a half years, and I haven't seen a cent. I can't live, and my little ones can't be sent to school, on promises.

"I don't believe my husband ever knew you. I'd hate to think that of him, anyway. Now. I either want satisfaction, or I'll see a lawyer!"

"My dear Mrs. Erhardt," Perrin placated speciously, applying the term in spite of the woman's angry gesture, "so far as employing an attorney is concerned, let me assure you it will only be an added expense. I haven't your money. It went for the stock which you purchased in a perfectly legitimate way and with eyes wide open. You received the certificates and receipted for them. Your threats do not frighten, I may as well tell you—"

"I want that money—my last three hundred dollars—you have it," in a voice which was rapidly breaking and mixing with tears. "It's here some place—in these fine jimcracks," waving one of her poorly gloved hands at the costly furniture. "I want it! I'll see a lawyer—or maybe you'd prefer the police?"

At the last word the scarlet tinge in Perrin's cheeks met up half-way with a pallid fear, turning his face to a sickly purple, splotched with yellow. But he proceeded with his explanations, while his white hand fell as softly on the jacket's worn sleeve as if he had been smoothing the feathers of an angry hen.

"Now, don't talk about unpleasant things—lawyers and—police. And you don't want your money, either, Mrs. Erhardt—not the principal, at least. Let's say you want your dividends. Isn't that it? Of course it is. I have

it from the directors of Crested Butte Consolidated—not on my own say-so, mark you, but on theirs—that in six months the company will be in such shape that you’ll be sorry you ever doubted the stock.”

“Oh, is that a promise, Mr. Perrin?” cried the woman, finally bursting into the tears which had been but a word or two away during the whole conversation. “If it is—I don’t mind the—the hard work I’m doing to keep the ch-children fed and clothed and in school. But I c-can’t stand the grind another day unless I know—know it’s coming right in the end.”

“Not a promise,” reneged Perrin hastily, who seemed unable to part with real money, “but my best judgment.”

A hand reached over his shoulder, picked up a pen, and dipped it into a cut-glass inkwell, probably as expensive as anything in the Erhardt home.

The Moll explained as he walked back to the table: “One o’ these letters ain’t right; I’ll fix it.”

Then he scratched away for a few seconds while the visitor, still sobbing, gave evidence of returning to her first advantage.

“Well, that isn’t satisfactory, Mr. Perrin. It was your judgment that got me in; and, oh, for God’s sake—for the sake of my babies—please get me out! You have that money. It’s here some place. I want it.”

“Are y’ sure o’ yer man, madam?”

The words were spoken as the Moll Buzzer came for the second time from the temporary mailing table. Perrin paused in the middle of a calming reply, started in surprise, and made as if to motion the intruder back.

The woman answered:

“What? Of course I’m sure! Didn’t I hand it to this man Perrin myself? Didn’t I see him take it?”

“I asked, lady,” answered the Moll, as if repeating something he had memorized, “because if you’re so sure o’ yer ground, what

have y’ t’ say t’ this check for three hundred dollars—your money? Perrin ain’t got it. I’m th’ one. I’m one o’ them directors he’s talkin’ about.

“Here’s yer check, ma’am. Go cash it—right away—fer them there babies!”

The woman seized the slip, eagerly assured herself that it set forth the things described, and cried:

“Thank God for an honest man! I knew it!”

The door opened and closed with a slam. Mrs. Erhardt was gone, but Perrin, the purple departed and the red again in his angry face, turned on the Moll.

“Now what? Do you think that’s the way I give up money? What do you mean?”

“I mean just this!” screeched the Moll, back at his place and his fist coming down on the sealed and stamped envelopes with a thump which made Perrin half hop out of his chair. “I mean that you—you—can go clean, immac’lately, c’nsecitively, an’ ev’ry other way, plumb t’ *hell!* Here’s where I quit this dump!”

The words came almost as loud as the table blow.

The stubble at the back of Hencher’s head, where the hair was cropped close and shaved round, seemed to stand out like hackles; cheeks that had long since lost the art of flushing turned drab as old ashes; drops of sweat stood out on the bulges below the dark eyes as if the man were in actual physical pain. Again he whacked the top of the polished table.

“Right here’s where I blow the joint! See?”

“You quit—you—you quit *me?*” scoffed Perrin, coming the other half out of his seat. He started with a sneer, but ended with scorn as he saw that the Moll must mean what he was saying.

“That’s it,” came the reply. “You did me a good turn wunst, an’ I’ve done you one

just now. That was a narrow squeak—she'd 'a' had th' bulls down on yuh. 'Sides, she ought t' had th' money. You an' me're square—an' I'm through. Through an' busted, too! But I'm satisfied."

"What's the idea, Hencher?" growled Perrin in a milder tone as something in the nature of a great light seemed to break over him. "I'll admit that maybe it was the right thing to do. But for me to have given her the money would have been an admission of guilt, don't you see? I'm obliged to you. Now calm down."

"Don't be obliged t' me fer anything!" bristled Hencher. "I want t' quit 'thout any obblegations."

"Oh, don't be a fool, Hencher! Be a crook if you must, but not an idiot. I've had enough grand-stand plays for one afternoon."

"Crook? Idiot? Who's a crook, Platt?" shouted the enraged looter of women. Then, noting the consternation and rising temper of his employer: "Yes—Platt! Bob Platt! An' it goes. You're a fine one t' talk about crooks! Why, you'd climb yer own porch t' crack yer baby's bank!"

"Sit down, you cheap pickpocket, and shut up! You d—— moll buzzer, d'you want the whole building to hear you?"

"They wouldn't be su'prised," fumed Hencher—"not if they've got th' sense God gave a goose. An' as fer moll-buzzin', I'm here t' tell you there's more'n one kind—an'

I'm t'rough with this kind. Get out o' me way, Platt! Lemme out! This dump stinks!"

"So that's the game?" husked Platt, his hands opening and closing and his face twitching in tremendous wrath. "Blackmail, eh? You think to make capital by peaching about those letters? You're out for a snitch, huh? You're going to hold me up on that check?"

"I'm not a snitch, Platt," interrupted the Moll. "I wouldn't touch a piece o' coin 'round here with a pair o' tongs. We're quits! No more women's weeps fer me."

"No, I suppose not," jeered Perrin. "The old crook can't stand prosperity. The dip can't toe the honest mark. The yegg don't care for respectability. I gave you a chance to be decent—"

"Decent! Honest! Prosperity!" exploded Hencher. "That's swell! I've swallered all that mush I want. Why, you'd frisk yer own wife's leather! Let me out!"

"Well, then, get back to your burgling of housemaids and your bargain-counter rushes!" cried Perrin, stepping to one side and pointing toward the door. "Git! Back to the moll-buzzing!"

"Not on yer life, Platt! Not on yer slick face an' dolled up hands!" flouted Hencher, jerking the door open and turning for a parting blast. "Here's where I—*go t' work!* Me fer a job! D'ye get me?"