

Slippery Elm

by James W. Egan

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THE average dick ain't supposed to be much of a sleuth. They'll tell you his head is no good except as a parkin' place for a derby, and that he's lucky if he ever catches anythin' besides the flu. Without a flock of stool canaries to help him he's alleged to be as useless as a blind man lookin' through a telescope.

Now, far be it from me to deny a lot of bulls would be better off pushin' pianos or packin' wheat, but I do maintain and assert we have some police officers with faint glimmers of intelligence and horse sense. Take my sidekick, Frank Bell. There's a young fellow with brains, and more than one yegg'll vote the same way.

When Frank came into plain clothes, right pronto he begins to make a lot of crooks around Cascade City study the fast-freight schedules. Bein' an old-timer at the game, they teamed me up with Frank, and I'll say the pair of us made a pretty neat record.

Of course when this Tonneson diamond thing came up, Frank and me had a shot at it, although old Steve Burnett would have liked to keep us out of the case. Steve is the captain of detectives, and one of the old browbeatin', knock 'em down and drag 'em out of school. He was always sneerin' at Frank's methods, but it never got him nothin'.

This Tonneson robbery was quite a smear for our burg. A string of the glass worth about thirty-five thousand dollars disappeared from Mrs. Newton Tonneson's boudoir some time durin' the

night which followed her big charity ball, and the lady wanted heaven and earth moved to get 'em back. And the Newton Tonnesons generally have any thin' they want.

Although Steve Burnett didn't hanker to have us dabblin' around, the chief of police laid down the statutes, and Frank and I were ordered out to give the premises the down and sideways.

"If we get hold of those sparks, the old man will be as tickled as a dame who doesn't get a new bonnet for Easter," I says, chucklin'. "He'd like to score in this himself."

"Oh, he's doped it out already," Frank replies. "Did you know that Mrs. Tonneson's maid disappeared last night?"

"The dickens you say! Your story interests me strangely. Go on."

"A young and rather pretty girl named Vera Andrews. She vanished sometime durin' the household slumbers—perhaps with the stones. Steve thinks so. He is combin' the city for the maid right now. Seems she had a scrap with Mrs. Tonneson last evenin' and got terrible sore."

"Oh, well, then, there's nothin' to this. The angry maid beats it and takes the diamonds to get even. Shucks!"

"You never can tell," Frank remarks, smilin'. "I want to study the scenery first. Burnett has already given the place the eagle eye, but he may have passed up somethin'. I'm a hound for detail, you know."

"We might find some good cigar ashes, or even footprints," I says. "I understand they're most valuable in clearin' up cases like this."

The two of us sure gave Mrs. Newton Tonneson's boudoir the twice-over, but we didn't find much. Frank did pick up somethin' that looked like a piece of bark somebody had been chewin', and stuck it in his pocket.

"Aha! A clew?" I says.

"Probably not. But I don't know what it was doin' here, and I like to satisfy my manly curiosity."

"Don't be hidin' out on your trusty henchman, young fellow," I warn, for Frank has a habit now and then of keepin' things to himself and not even lettin' me in on it.

My partner grinned and suggested we have a chat with Mrs. Newton Tonneson. That rich and well-garbed lady was greatly annoyed.

"That wretched little Vera!" she storms. "I thought she was the soul of honesty, too! To sneak out of the house in the dead of night with my diamond string!"

"You think she stole them, do you, Mrs. Tonneson?" I ask.

"Well, somebody took them! They're gone, anyway. And why did Vera leave this way if she wasn't connected with the robbery?"

"I believe your maid quarreled with you last night, Mrs. Tonneson?" Frank comes in. "What was the trouble over? Do you recall?"

"She was impudent. Very impudent when I chided her for entertainin' some rough-lookin' fellow yesterday afternoon. I told Mr. Burnett about him. He thinks the pair were plannin' to rob me."

"A logical conclusion," Frank admits. "Steve may be right in this. By the way, Mrs. Tonneson, your boudoir can be

reached from an outside window, can't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it can."

"That window wasn't fastened last night. Or was it?"

"I don't remember."

"So it would have been an easy job for somebody to climb up and enter through the window, I take it?"

"Vera's confederate, you mean, I suppose? Yes, I was very careless last night. But I was so tired after the ball, I just put the jewels in a case on my dresser, and fell asleep."

"You heard nothin'—no racket?"

"Positively not. I don't waken easily, anyway, and Mr. Tonneson sleeps in another part of the house."

"H'm!" says Frank, becomin' very clear and explicit. "H'm!"

He and I took another whirl around the family mansion and then flivvered back to headquarters.

"What's your hunch—if any?" I inquire.

"It's a very slim one," my partner confesses. "I'm goin' to do a little ransackin' by my lonesome this afternoon, but I'm afraid old Steve has called it right in this case."

Before long Frank and I found the old boy had been busy himself. He had dug up the information that Vera Andrews was the sweetheart of one Sammy Cliff, who was released from the county jail the very day precedin' the diamond disappearance. Cliff's past record was not so bad, neither was it so good. Evidently he and the maid had disappeared together, and Burnett was determined to land both of 'em in the hoosegow.

Frank deserted me in the early p. m. hours and didn't show up until after dinner. Just as he arrived, Calkins and Rivers, two of our flat-foots, gassed up in the wagon and helped unload a scrappy

young man in a pea coat, together with a very pretty little girl. Sammy Cliff and Vera Andrews had been gloomed.

Steve Burnett had them in his office right pronto, and let 'em sample one of his famous grillin's. But they denied any knowledge of the robbery, and no diamonds were found upon them. The girl claimed that she and Sammy were intendin' to marry.

"As soon as they let Sammy out of the county jail, he hunted me up and told me he was goin' to behave after this," she says, sobbin'. "Then Mrs. Tonneson was so mean and insultin' to me in the evenin' that I made up my mind to pack up and get out. I wouldn't stay another night under her roof. I left before midnight and stayed all night at my cousin's. I helped Sammy look for a job to-day, and I'll swear I knew nothin' about the robbery until we were pinched to-night."

"That be hanged for a yarn!" growls Steve, but he could get no guilty admissions out of the pair. In high temper he ordered both of them locked up, booked as suspicious characters.

"I'll sweat it out of them!" he tells Frank and I.

"Captain, I don't think they had a hand in the robbery," my partner says.

"You bet they had a hand in it—four hands!" barks old Steve. "I'll get the goods on them yet. Your bum theories won't work in this case, Bell."

So Frank withdrew and went down to the women's cells to have a little spiel with Vera Andrews. I hoped she wasn't guilty myself, for she was a sweet little kid, as far as looks went, and I liked her eyes. This lover of hers, Sammy Cliff, didn't seem a bad young guy, either. It's not often I get sentimental about people who land in jail, but I ain't granite, either. Darn few bulls are.

"Have you got somethin' up your

sleeve, Frank?" I ask my partner.

"Yes, my good fellow," he responds, with a twinklin' eye.

"What is it?"

"The needle, of course. What could a detective do without his needle?"

I gave it up peevishly and immersed myself in the even in' newspapers.

Frank and I spent a large part of the next mornin' intrudin' into pawnshops, per orders from Steve, who seemed to think the baubles had been soaked, or ditched. Nothin' doin'. Our heart wasn't in the job, anyhow.

"Let's go out to the ball game this afternoon," Frank says. "I haven't seen Vancouver play this season, and they're bein' entertained this week."

"Ball game!" I says. "What's that got to do with our work on this case?"

"Work is for slaves," says Frank. "Smoke Slattery is to pitch this afternoon, I think, and I've never seen him."

So we managed to get away to the ball game that afternoon. I'm not much of a fan. But Frank is mighty fond of the game. Cascade City won by a shutout, 3 to 0, and Smoke Slattery was the whole show. His spitball delivery had the opposition completely baffled.

"Smoke throws a mean line of slants, don't he?" Frank remarks. "That spitter of his is a dandy. I wonder how he throws it? I have a notion to ask him."

"Where you goin'?" I demand.

The crowd was filin' out of the stands, but Frank started to push his way toward the field.

"Down to the clubhouse. Come along, Derry."

Growlin' to myself, I followed Frank to the domicile of the Cascade City players, where some of them, includin' the triumphant Mr. Slattery, were already climbin' under the showers.

"What do you want?" somebody asks

us.

"You pitched a fine game, Smoke," Frank utters, admiringly eyin' the brawny hurler. "How do you throw that spitball?"

"Toward the batter," replies Slattery, and several players laughed.

"I don't see how you can keep the ball moist for so long," Frank pursues very innocently. "It must take a lot of saliva, doesn't it?"

Several of the athletes stared at Frank as if wonderin' what kind of a boob this was, and one chirps:

"Don't you know what a spitball pitcher has to do? He chews stuff like slippery elm bark or things like that to keep up the supply of moisture."

"Oh, do you chew slippery elm, Lew—I mean Smoke?" queries Frank.

"What's that?" says the pitcher, harshly. "What you call me?"

"I called you Lew," responds my partner. "Lew Fitts is your name. That's what it was when you did your jolt at San Quentin, and when you used to pitch for the pen nine at Walla Walla, Washington. I see you still have your tattooed lady on your left forearm, too."

"This guy is crazy!" the pitcher shouts, kinda hoarse. "Get him outa here!"

"Yes, I'll be leavin'," says Frank, smilin', "but I'll have company, Lew. Get into your rags quick, now, and beat it to the can with us."

He threw back his lapel, flashin' the old star on the crowd.

"Why, you poor nut—what have I done?" demands the heaver, tryin' hard not to seem rattled.

"Unless I'm badly mistaken you're the bird who copped thirty-five thousand dollars worth of diamonds from Mrs. Newton Tonneson the other night," says my partner. "We want you for burglary!"

Slattery, or Fitts, turned to the players. "Did you ever hear the like? I never heard

of no diamonds, even."

"Why don't you read the papers, then?" asks Frank, snappy like. "Quit stallin' and get dressed. If you ain't guilty we'll give you a chance to prove it."

A few minutes later we had the pitcher on the way to the station, takin' along with us his handbag, which held a glove and several league baseballs. He had no other property. I was as puzzled as our captive seemed to be, but I kept mum. The manager of the ball team had promised to bail him out as soon as it could be arranged, and the spitball tosser wore the air of a sufferin' martyr.

We booked our victim with the jailer as held for investigation, and "Solid Ivory" Jones, who was on shift at the time, was wide-eyed.

"What you down here for, Smoke?" he demands. "This ain't no place for a ball player."

"Oh, a coupla wise dicks have pulled another skull," the pitcher says, growling. "I won't be here very long."

Jones relieved him of his valuables and the bag, and escorted him to a cell. A little later Frank and I brought him into Steve Burnett's office, and found the old man mighty fussy.

"What's this bird done?" he wants to know.

"He's the guy who hooked the Tonneson stones," says Frank.

"Well, let's have the dope, Derrick," Steve barks, turnin' to me.

"Frank can tell it," I remark in a hurry. "He's more familiar with the facts."

A fellow as much in the dark as I was, could explain a whole lot, indeed.

"Go on, Bell," orders the cap.

"I'll be brief," Frank promises. "This man who calls himself Smoke Slattery, is really Lew Fitts, who has done two jolts for burglary in San Quentin and Walla Walla. I believe he pulled off this

Tonneson affair, because it is in his line.”

“Oh, he’s crazy!” says the pitcher, snarlin’.

“What makes you think he did it, Bell?” old Steve asks, sour enough.

“In lookin’ over the scene of the robbery, I picked up a piece of bark, partly chewed. It was slippery elm, and I got the hunch the burglar must have dropped it—or how did it come there? Now who would be apt to spend time chewin’ slippery elm? A baseball player—usually a spitball pitcher.”

“Oh, bunk!” sneers the prisoner.

“Mighty few crooks are spitball pitchers, of course,” Frank goes on, very calm. “I had an idea this was pulled off by an old head, so I began to look up the records. I ran across the name Lew Fitts, who made a rep while in the pen by his baseball pitchin’, bein’ particularly effective with a spitball. And I can dig up the stuff to show that Lew Fitts is Smoke Slattery. You know how easily that is done, Lew—with the tattooed lady on your arm, and all?”

“Supposin’ I am Lew Fitts?” the pitcher utters, defiantly. “That don’t prove I stole anythin’. I’m makin’ my livin’ playin’ professional ball.”

“That’s why you changed your name, I suppose? Just a stall, Lew. Who’d suspect a league hurler of bein’ a burglar, ordinarily? I wouldn’t, if it hadn’t been for the slippery-elm bark.”

“All bunk! Would I be crazy enough if I was the burglar to chew slippery elm and throw it down for a dick to pick up?”

“No, but a piece might have dropped out of your old clothes unknown to you. Your old baseball sweater, most likely. I’ll bet that’s what happened. Anyhow, I found it there.”

“Where are the stones?” butts in Steve.

“Yes, where are they?” says the prisoner. “You didn’t find ‘em on me, did

you? Why don’t you have my hotel room searched? Maybe you’ll find ‘em lyin’ around there?”

“No. I have had your room searched. You’ve ditched them in some safe place, no doubt. But we’ll dig ‘em up.”

“Oh, this is foolish!” The heaver turned to the captain, knowin’ he was not too friendly toward Frank. “They can’t prove nothin’ on me, and there’s nothin’ to show I have the stones. I ought to be turned loose.”

“I can’t see where you have a case against him, Bell,” Steve says, with malice. “He may be Lew Fitts, but the evidence is too thin to hold him. That theorizin’ over a piece of bark don’t register with me. People will be thinkin’ the police are all boneheads. This pair we have in jail—the maid and the ex-jailbird—are more likely the guilty birds.”

“But, captain,” begins Frank.

Steve refused to argue. “Turn him loose. We can’t keep him!” he growls.

As we marched the sneerin’ Fitts-Slattery back to the jailer’s office, I was secretly wonderin’ if Frank hadn’t missed his step. At that, I wanted to see this big pitcher hooked. I didn’t like his style at all.

“Give this fellow his stuff,” Frank tells Solid Ivory Jones, who got that name for his high-grade thinkin’ years ago.

“Didn’t stay long, Smoke,” the jailer says, with a grin.

“No, I didn’t think I would,” responds the pitcher.

Frank is scowlin’ to himself.

“Say, Smoke,” utters Jones as he starts to hand over the bag, “I see you have two or three baseballs in here—old ones, I guess. Might let us have one to play catch with. You can get lots of ‘em, you know.”

It was the kind of thing you’d expect from Jones, but it sure fussed Smoke for a second.

“Don’t you touch any of those

baseballs!" he cries. "I—I—that is, you birds—"

"Let me have that bag!" suddenly commands Frank, and he snatched it from the jailer.

Openin' it, while our late prisoner looked on with a funny expression, my partner scanned the three baseballs he found there, and weighed each in his hand. One of them he retained.

"Doesn't feel right, Fitts," he says, and he began to grin. "And it is newly stitched, too. Guess we'll go back and show old Steve this. Might have expected a ball player would hide his booty on familiar ground."

After the stitches were cut away and a lot of yarn unwrapped, in the captain's office, we had the pleasure of lookin' at a handful of dazzlin' diamonds which had recently composed the Tonneson string. The pitcher-burglar had put 'em in a rubber core, wrapped 'em with yarn, and even had the nerve to go to a cobbler and

get a leather cover sewed around the precious loot.

Havin' the shiners in front of him, Fitts—it was he, all right—broke down and admitted prowlin' the place and grabbin' the gems. He had entered from the outside through the unlocked window, and must have spilled the piece of slippery elm somehow, for he was wearin' an old sweater containin' a few chunks of the bark, he said. Naturally, his story cleared Vera, the maid, and Sammy Cliff.

Steve Burnett had mighty little to say, but he was mad enough to bite iron into little bits. Bell had put somethin' over once again.

"Just the same, you were pretty lucky, old close-mouth," I remark later. "I guess the only thing left for us to do is to blow Solid Ivory to the best feed in town."

"Yes, we'll do that," Frank agrees, "and then, too, we might ask Steve to be the best man when Sammy Cliff marries little Vera."

But don't ever think we did.