

GONE *with the* LOOT

By JOHN L. BENTON

A famous emerald vanishes in a cloud of mystery!

NANCY GARLAND woke with a little secret thrill of happiness running through her, like a kid on Christmas morning. She stretched her long limbs and was so happy that she even forgot her great sorrow that instead of being a blonde, her hair was just plain red.

For two things had happened to her yesterday. She had met THE man, and he had invited her to the swank party being tossed by Mrs. Van Alstine, whose blood was bluer than fountain pen ink.



Entree at Mrs. Van Alstine's meant that John Clark was somebody in Who's Who himself. And while Nancy was not celebrity crazy, it was nice to meet the man of your dreams and then find out he was more than just a conductor on the Third Avenue car line.

He was handsome and big and brawny, with the kind of square chin and steady eyes that made goose-pimples run all over Nancy's

photogenic body as she thought of him. Best of all, he had seemed as smitten as she. He had given her the kind of rush every girl likes—from the right man—and had wound up by inviting her to go to the society brawl.

"Only I've got to be there early," he told her. "Something about the arrangements to protect Mrs. Van Alstine's jewels. You know, she insists on wearing that rock—the emerald of Khaipur, or whatever they call it, and the thing is a constant temptation to certain unmoral citizens."

"Yes, of course," Nancy breathed. She'd read about the emerald of Khaipur until it was like the Taj Mahal or some other purely mythical wonder. And now she was to see it!

"So, you just come along by yourself—you'll be expected and admitted, and I'll look you up as soon as I can. Okay?"

It was decidedly okay, Nancy thought, as she taxied to the pile of stone and marble on Riverside Drive that was the Van Alstine mansion. At Clark's request, she had worn a simple red frock which matched the gleaming highlights in her hair and touched her eyes with blue fire.

"Just simple," Clark had admonished her. "Nothing fancy about these afternoon parties."

The butler seemed to recognize her name.

"Ah, yes, Miss Garland. Go right in. You'll find Mr. Clark about somewhere. And you'll—uh—keep your eyes open, won't you?"

"My what?" Nancy murmured, dazed. But the butler had already passed her on and was greeting new arrivals, who were coming in a swarm. Baffled, she passed into a huge hall, ablaze with lights from crystal chandeliers and cluttered to the roof with statuary, *objets d'art*

and other gimcracks. All of it made a sightly, if somewhat crowded array.

NANCY looked for Clark. She wandered through the vast hall, following the crowd. She was amused to see a flunkey of some sort in the next doorway, dressed in a steel breastplate, with a helmet of ancient design on his head, holding a huge pike and a shield.

“Nothing fancy about Mrs. Van Alstine,” she muttered to herself. “Just dresses up her footmen like medieval soldiers. I’ll bet the waiters will come out disguised as Alice in Wonderland.”

Then Nancy got the shock of her life. For the next footman, or soldier, whatever he was, winked at her!

She had to look three times before she recognized John Clark.

Nancy’s lovely lips made around O and stayed that way.

“Close it,” Clark said, out of the corner of his mouth. “Somebody’ll build an airfield in it.”

Nancy could only sputter.

“What—what—”

“I’m a halberdier,” Clark said. “Guarding the castle, like of old.” He lifted his halberd slightly—the huge pikelike weapon—and let it fall with a thump on the floor.

Several guests turned to look. Nancy felt her cheeks flame scarlet as he grinned at her and more guests began looking.

“You—you—” No words came and afraid she would make a fool of herself in earnest, she all but ran from him. And as she went, came the cracking and rumbling of her world falling about her ears.

She had been ready, primed and willing to fall in love with him! He was so big and romantic and he-man looking! And he turned out to be a waiter or servant at Van Alstine’s! With all his big talk about society!

“Let me out of here,” she said determinedly to herself and started to search

for an exit.

But at that moment came a dramatic interruption. It came in the form of a scream like the five o’clock whistle on the factory near Nancy’s subway station. Everyone of the scores of guests in that huge room whirled.

A pouter pigeon of a woman was being supported by two halberdiers. Neither of them John Clark. The men had dropped their shields and halberds to support her not inconsiderable weight.

“My jewel!” Mrs. Van Alstine screamed in a refined sort of way. “The emerald of Khaipur!”

Nancy’s first reaction was one of disappointment as she watched the plump Van Alstine hand clutch at a neck bereft of its pendant. Now she never would get to see the fabulous emerald.

Instinctively she glanced aside at the doorway where her ex-love, John Clark, had been posted. She saw him, with a tense, eager look in his eye, inching out from the doorway, behind the crowding throng of excited guests.

And suddenly, inexplicably, suspicion was born in Nancy Garland’s soul. There was something about that halberdier she definitely mistrusted.

It all fitted in so perfectly! He wormed his way into the Van Alstine household, took a job as a flunkey, got into this outrageous disguise, all so he could engineer the theft of the emerald! Engineer, she thought, because encased in his bulky armor, carrying a shield and halberd, he could hardly have snatched the bauble from Mrs. Van’s neck himself.

That meant he had a confederate in the house. Nancy began surreptitiously craning her neck to see where he was heading. Then there was a second interruption.

A tall man in a brown suit, wearing a snap-brim felt, leaped onto a table and called for silence.

“Detective Marshall from Police Headquarters,” he announced himself, holding out a bright gold badge in his palm. “The

house is closed—and covered. Please, no one will try to leave. I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but you will have to be searched, individually, until the emerald is found. Please stay where you are until sent for."

He leaped down from the table and vanished in the crowd. The two halberdiers tenderly supported Mrs. Van Alstine to a brocaded love seat which she overflowed like a feather pillow, uttering low, genteel groans.

Nancy lost interest in both the hostess and the brisk detective. She had her eye on John Clark, halberdier again. Slipping through the crowd, she followed him as he edged his way out of the room.

Through a dimmer lighted hall she tiptoed, having no difficulty in hearing the louder clumping of his steps. Into a vast kitchen with a frightening expanse of white enamel, glass-doored cupboards, electric ranges and shining copper pots the trail led. There the halberdier disappeared.

PANICKY, Nancy scurried about the big room. The servants were nowhere in sight, evidently having been herded away for questioning. Then she saw a door slightly ajar. She pulled it open and from below, heard the muffled clump of the halberdier's steps.

Aha, she thought. The rat is run to earth. He had made a fatal mistake when he forgot himself long enough to invite Nancy Garland to this party. Love was the doom of Samson, wasn't it?

"Go on down," she told herself. "Scared? Bet your life I am! Well, this is as good a time as any for telling off that big lug. Go on!"

With her heart pounding in her throat, she tiptoed through the door and down the cellar steps. At the bottom she found herself in a huge vaulted chamber, like the dungeon of a medieval castle. The walls were stone, the doorways narrow arches. Dim lights burned eerily.

In this half-lighted gloom, she saw the bright armor of the halberdier. He had set

aside his shield and halberd and was bending over a big wooden chest in one corner.

Nancy's foot scuffed on the stones. The halberdier whirled like a cat and his gauntleted hand snatched up his weapon. On the end of that seven-foot pole was a glittering axe and a spear point above that. The murderous steel was flashing through the air even as Clark whirled and the spear point stopped inches from Nancy's face.

"Nancy!" Clark exclaimed, startled.

The girl swallowed her heart.

"Yes, you crook," she said bitterly. "You invited me here, remember? Who'd you expect, the police?"

"Hardly," Clark said, shaking his head.

"You're a thief," Nancy cried. "I'm going up and call that detective, Marshall."

"I wouldn't do that," Clark said, ominously. He put his hand on her arm.

"Let go of me," she cried, shaking him off. "I will—you fake halberdier, you."

"You don't have to, Miss," the detective said, stepping out of the archway behind her. "I followed you down."

An automatic in his hand was leveled at Clark's chest.

"A thirty-eight slug will go through that sardine box you're wearing, Langton," Marshall said. "Better get your hands up."

"Langton!" Nancy moaned. "He even lied about his n-name!"

Clark raised his hands promptly. In doing so he let go of the seven-foot halberd. It started to fall and the bright blade of the axe swept down directly for Marshall's head. The detective yelped in alarm and dodged. He tripped over the shield and went down, the gun flying from his hand.

With amazing quickness for so big a man, Clark pounced. He scooped up the gun and as Marshall struggled to rise, calmly brought the flat side of it against the detective's head. The snap-brim felt came off. Marshall slumped quietly to the floor.

"You murderous beast," Nancy breathed.

Her red-headed temper snapped. At Clark's side hung a wicked-looking poniard in a metal and leather sheath.

Before he could guess her intentions she had darted in and snatched the dagger from its scabbard. The bright triangular blade flashed like a thing alive.

Clark saw his danger. He jumped in, caught her wrist with his left hand. She struggled like a wildcat and kicked him in the shins. Though he made a grimace of pain he did not let go, but caught her other wrist and crushed her against him. She felt the cold hard shell of the armor bruising her ribs.

"You little wildcat," he panted. "Drop that knife before you cut yourself."

A creaking sound made them both stop as though on signal. The lid of the big chest was rising upward. And in the opening was framed a man who might have been Detective Marshall's brother. The same lean, sharp-featured face, the same double-breasted suit and snap-brim felt. And an equally lethal-looking automatic in his hand. It was pointed directly at Clark.

"Oh, there you are," Clark said foolishly.

He let go the girl and stepped back. She stood with the dagger clutched in her hand, eyes going from one to the other.

"Yeah, here I am," the man said flatly.

Still holding the gun on Clark, he put one leg over the edge of the chest. Behind him the lid tipped over and came swiftly down.

Nancy opened her mouth to scream, but it was too late. The lid caught the leg that was still inside just above the knee. The man was thrown off balance. He started to fall and put out his hands instinctively to save himself. Clark neatly scooped the gun out of his hand. "All right, Langton," he said. "Stand over near your brother."

"Langton!" Nancy gasped. "Now which one of you is which?"

"Let me introduce the Langton brothers," Clark said, nodding. "Two of the best jewel thieves in the business. The one who posed as Detective Marshall is Fred. The one who was in the chest is Harry. Harry has the emerald, I presume, or he wouldn't be hiding while his brother held the crowd upstairs so he could escape."

"And who are you?"

"I am Detective John Clark," the halberdier said modestly. "As you might have known, Red, if there was any gray matter under that thatch."

HE RAN a hand expertly over Harry Langton and brought it away with a chain dangling from his fingers. At the end of the chain hung the famous emerald of Khaipur. The stone pulsed and throbbed in that dim vault with a blazing green fire.

"Oooh," Nancy breathed, forgetting how scared she was. "Let me touch?"

"I'll do more than that," Clark promised. "I'll let you take it upstairs your own precious self and hand it back to Mrs. Van Alstine if—"

"If what?" Nancy said, feasting her eyes on the incredible jewel.

"If you'll carry my halberd and shield and take good care of them, while I herd these mugs after you. Halberdiers are mighty scarce these days."

"You're crazy," Nancy said with conviction.

"Still crazy about you, Red," Clark said with a grin. "How about a date after the party?"

Nancy's wink was answer enough.