



With a leap Doris reached the door and pushed against it

Death's Social Blunder

By JOHN L. BENTON

J. Martin Stover posed as a butler, but what he knew about criminal etiquette would fill a jail!

WOMEN usually reacted in two ways at first sight of J. Martin Stover. Those who were stout-hearted merely felt a bit sorry for the timid little gray-haired man, while others were forced to control an impulse to scream and leap up on a chair.

Stover's resemblance to a mouse suddenly become a man was striking enough to inspire the fear of rodents

among susceptible females.

The receptionist of the Jefferson Hartley Placement Bureau was blond, beautiful and serene. Her reaction to Martin Stover as he stood in front of her desk was one of complete indifference. As for himself, the little man had the vague impression that he had wandered across a vast desert of thick, expensive carpet to arrive, finally, at an oasis represented by

Miss Heatherton's chrome-plated desk.

"I—I'd like to talk to Mr. Hartley about a position," J. Martin Stover said meekly. "I seek domestic employment."

"Name, please?" Miss Heatherton, picked up a gold fountain pen and a white card ruled with blue lines. Her henna-hued fingernails were long enough to make a tiger jealous.

"Mr. Hartley never interviews anyone without full information in advance," she explained disinterestedly.

As he gave his name, address and telephone number, J. Martin Stover discovered that he did not care for Miss Heatherton in the least. She was as bright and attractive as spun glass—and probably just as brittle.

"What position are you seeking?" asked the receptionist finally.

Stover drew himself up proudly, but failed to appear very impressive.

"Butler, or gentleman's gentleman," he announced.

Miss Heatherton did not even smile. She wrote down the occupation desired on the space reserved for it on the card. Then she glanced up and waved vaguely toward a row of modernistic chairs in one corner of the reception room.

"If you'll just wait over there, I'll see if Mr. Hartley will see you," said Miss Heatherton.

Stover nodded and wandered over and sat down carefully in a chair. He drew a week-old newspaper out of his pocket and glanced at it. Miss Heatherton rose from her desk and then sat down again, as the entrance door opened and a stout, expensively dressed woman appeared.

The dowager sailed majestically up to the desk.

"I'm Mrs. John Waketon Gibson," she announced, "*The* Mrs. John Waketon Gibson—and the most terrible thing has happened. I've lost my social secretary.

Isn't that just too, too ghastly for words?"

"Of course, Mrs. Gibson," Miss Heatherton agreed. "But no doubt Mr. Hartley will be able to help you." She picked up the phone on her desk. "I'll see if he can't see you right away."

"Please do. I'm nearly frantic. I'm giving a ball for the Navy Relief Fund next week, and there is so much work to be done."

Mrs. Gibson seated herself in a chair beside the desk. "When Nancy Parker told me that she was leaving—that she was going home to be married, my dear—you could have knocked me over with a feather," the dowager rattled on.

THE receptionist put down the phone.

"Mr. Hartley will see you in a few minutes, Mrs. Gibson," she said. "I'm so sorry, but I didn't gather what you were saying."

"That I never even dreamed there was a man in Nancy Parker's life. Such a quiet girl, and so conscious of that diamond-shaped scar on her left cheek."

Mrs. Gibson shook her head sadly.

"She seemed actually ashamed to be seen in public. Imagine! I told her she was just too, too utterly self-conscious."

J. Martin Stover, mouselike as ever, stared thoughtfully at a little item on the third page of his week-old newspaper.

WOMAN'S BODY FOUND IN RIVER

A blond woman's body was discovered in the East River by boys swimming near East 86th Street. The woman, about 28, wore a brown dress, tan shoes and stockings. There was a diamond-shaped scar on her left cheek. The body has been taken to the city morgue to await identification.

The phone on Miss Heatherton's desk rang softly. The receptionist murmured something and put the handset back in its cradle.

"Mr. Hartley will see you now, Mrs.

Gibson," she said, rising from the desk. "Please come with me."

"I do hope that he has someone nice in the way of a social secretary," Mrs. Gibson declared, trailing after Miss Heatherton like a tug following a yacht. "That's so important—I mean, it really is."

Stover sighed as the two women disappeared behind a closed door. He turned the pages of his paper over until he reached the section that contained the crossword puzzle. A few of the words had been filled in. The little man drew out a pencil and went to work. Evidently he had found this puzzle particularly baffling.

Quite some time passed but J. Martin Stover was obviously a patient soul. Finally Miss Heatherton returned to her desk. She glanced over casually at Stover and said nothing. He continued to wait.

Eventually Mrs. Gibson appeared. A tall, slender, brown-haired girl was with her. The girl was smartly dressed in a brick red frock and wore a turban of the same shade. Her big navy-blue purse dangled from a long strap slung over the girl's shoulder.

"Such a relief," sighed Mrs. Gibson. "I've been so timid about engaging someone I wasn't sure I could trust. So many of my friends have been robbed during the past few months. Why, the burglars seemed to know just where to find everything."

She glanced at the girl with her.

"What was your name again, my dear?"

"Doris Radford," the girl said. "I'm sure you will find me completely trustworthy, Mrs. Gibson."

J. Martin Stover wrote "Doris Radford" in two empty spaces of his crossword puzzle. He frowned and quickly rubbed out the name.

"I'm sure you are completely honest," said Mrs. Gibson. "And I was so

impressed when Mr. Hartley actually made me give him references before he would permit me to engage you. Such a charming man!"

With a gushing word to the receptionist Mrs. Gibson and Doris Radford departed. Stover carefully folded up his paper and thrust it into his pocket. He marched over to the reception desk with a determined air.

"I can't wait any longer," he said. "Does Mr. Hartley intend to see me or not?"

MISS HEATHERTON wore her blond hair piled high on her head because she imagined it made her look regal. She glanced up at the little man as though completely surprised at finding him still there.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Stover," she said. "Mr. Hartley asked me to tell you there were no butler's positions available at present. We'll keep your name and address on file."

Stover was standing quite close to her. His feet apparently slipped as he turned away. He reached out to keep himself from falling and his fingers poked hard into Miss Heatherton's golden tresses. She gasped as her hair came tumbling down.

"So sorry," Stover apologized as he scurried to the door, more mouselike than ever. "An accident."

He glanced over his shoulder as he reached the door. A big, distinguished-looking man, immaculately dressed, his thick dark hair turning gray at the temples, had appeared from the inner offices.

"I wouldn't care to have you find me employment, Mr. Hartley," J. Martin Stover declared. "The way your receptionist acts is much too embarrassing."

Stover had a picture of Jefferson Hartley standing there, glaring at Miss

Heatherton as she faced him confusedly, her hair hanging down in wild disarray. The little man was smiling oddly as he closed the entrance door from the outside and hurried from the employment agency.

But he was a very odd little man.

An hour later found Doris Radford in one of the bedrooms of Mrs. John Waketon Gibson's penthouse on Park Avenue. There was a strange expression in the girl's eyes as she gazed at the collection of jewelry that the wealthy dowager had just taken out of a wall safe.

"Of course I'll wear my pearls at the ball next week," Mrs. Gibson said, fumbling through the jewel box. "Here they are. The most perfect set of matched pearls in the city, if I do say so myself."

"Isn't it rather dangerous for you to keep all those jewels around, Mrs. Gibson?" Doris asked, her voice low. "I mean, you might be robbed."

"Why?" Mrs. Gibson looked at her strangely. "But—"

"I wouldn't say too much," said Doris softly. "The servants might be listening, you know."

"Oh, of course." Mrs. Gibson nodded, as she examined the pearl necklace. "Why, I do believe the clasp is broken."

"Let me see." Doris took the string of pearls and examined the clasp. "You're right. The little safety catch is completely broken off. Only a jeweler could fix it."

"I must have it done at once," Mrs. Gibson decided. "I wonder if you would be kind enough to take the pearls to Tiffington's for me, Doris. Just leave them there."

"Why of course, Mrs. Gibson," Doris said. "I'll go now if you wish."

She was still wearing the red turban. She dropped the string of pearls into the bag that hung from her shoulder.

"I'll have them phone when I get to Tiffington's," Doris added, "so you will

know that the pearls arrived there safely."

"That won't be necessary," Mrs. Gibson told her. "If you'll just call me after you deliver them, that will do nicely. Besides, I might think of something that I want you to do later."

"All right," Doris nodded. "I'll phone you then."

A few minutes later the slender, brown-haired girl stepped out of the apartment building and went to the nearest taxi standing in line at the curb. She was carrying a suitcase in one hand. "Hotel Skyview," she said as she got into the cab.

"Okay, lady."

The driver drove off across town. Doris Radford sat clutching her handbag, and her eyes were hard. When the cab reached the hotel she paid the driver. A bellboy appeared and took her bag, and she walked through the lobby to the desk.

DORIS signed the register as she engaged a room and bath, but the name she wrote was Martha Hill—not Doris Radford. The bellhop took her up to her room and left after she had tipped him. As soon as she was alone, Doris picked up the phone and gave a number to the switchboard operator.

"Mr. Hartley, please," she said as a feminine voice answered. "D calling. Personal."

There was a few moment's wait. Then—

"Hello, Doris," said the deep voice of Jefferson Hartley. "What's wrong?"

"I'm quitting, Jeff. I'm chucking up the whole thing. I'm sick of it. I'm getting out of town for good."

"Wait a minute!" Hartley exclaimed over the wire. "Let's talk this over, Doris. Where are you now?"

"Where you'll never find me."

She laughed softly, and then her eyes narrowed at the brief pause before Hartley

again voiced a protest. "I'm through and that's all there is to it," Doris repeated. "You have no kick. I've done the work you asked during the past three months. Done it so carefully that no one suspects you."

"Don't say so much over the phone," Hartley snapped. "Someone might be listening. I must see you, Doris. You haven't any money to get away—at least, not enough to keep you going for any length of time."

"That's where you're wrong," said Doris coldly. "I have a way of getting a lot of money right now."

She patted the bag with its string of pearls as though she thought Hartley was watching her over the wire.

"A very good way, Jeff. In fact, I expect to get enough money to interest even you."

"You're very foolish, Doris." His voice was hard. "Something might happen to you."

"Like it did to Nancy Parker, because she was fool enough to face you when she decided to quit?" Doris charged. "I don't like threats, Jeff. Good-by!"

She hung up quickly. She glanced at her suitcase and then placed it in front of the room's closed door. She had suddenly grown tense and anxious. Then she smiled. She picked up the phone again and gave Mrs. Gibson's number.

"This is Doris, Mrs. Gibson," she said. "I left the pearls at Tiffington's—and now I'm having lunch at the Skyview Hotel."

"I'll bet you are going to meet some young man," Mrs. Gibson chided. "Well, have a good time, Doris. You can have the afternoon to yourself. I won't expect you back until evening."

"Thank you, Mrs. Gibson."

Doris slowly put down the phone. Her eyes widened as she saw the door of the room open slightly. A blue-coated figure

was standing there, and he had a gun in his hand.

With a quick leap Doris reached the door and leaned against it. As she pushed it shut, the uniformed police officer was caught between the door and the jamb. She grabbed the wrist that held the gun with her left hand, while her right snapped open her purse and drew out an automatic. Mrs. Gibson's pearls tumbled over the edge of the pocketbook and hung there.

Doris' eyes narrowed as she glanced at the collar of the policeman's uniform. She released his wrist and stepped back, covering him.

"Come in," she ordered coldly.

He pushed the door open, shoving the suitcase aside as he did so. He entered and then closed the door behind him.

"What's the meaning of this?" Doris demanded.

"I'm Officer O'Bryan," he declared. "You're under arrest."

"For what?" the girl demanded.

HE hesitated and then smiled as he saw the pearls hanging out of her purse. "For stealing those pearls," he said. "I—"

He broke off at the soft knock on the door.

"Come in," Doris said.

The door opened and Jefferson Hartley stood there. He frowned as he saw the policeman.

"Good heavens, Doris!" exclaimed the head of the employment agency as he entered the room, closing the door behind him. "What's happened? Why are you covering this officer with a gun?"

"So you found me, Jeff," Doris said, and she sounded tired. "I might have known you would be clever enough to have a call from a hotel switchboard traced."

"Of course, my dear," Hartley agreed coolly. "I told you that you were very

foolish to try to get away. I reported you to the police, told them that they had better place you under arrest because you had stolen my wallet at the office.”

“That’s right, lady,” the uniformed man repeated. “You’re under arrest.”

Doris’ jaw set.

“Stop acting, both of you,” she snapped. “I know that this is one of your stooges, gotten up like a policeman, Jeff. That bluff won’t work.”

“Gee, how did you figure that!” The man’s mouth gaped open. “I thought I was doing a good job.”

“It was the uniform,” Doris told him contemptuously. “You aren’t wearing any precinct numbers on your collar. That’s what made me suspect you weren’t a real officer.”

The girl smiled faintly.

“Even if you were assigned to special duty, you’d be wearing some sort of insignia. Besides, you claimed you came here to arrest me for stealing pearls. Hartley just said I stole his wallet.”

“Very clever, Doris,” Hartley grated, his tone harsh and menacing. “It’s too bad you know so much about the police. It might be dangerous for you!”

He moved toward her, halted quickly as the girl raised the automatic she still held in her hand. Jefferson Hartley scowled. His gaze centered on the pearls dangling from the handbag.

“You stole those from Mrs. Gibson,” he accused.

“Not exactly,” Doris said easily. “The catch is broken. Mrs. Gibson asked me to leave the pearls at the jewelers and have the clasp repaired. I haven’t done so yet. In fact, I may never.”

“You’re mad!” exclaimed Hartley. “As soon as Mrs. Gibson learns you haven’t delivered those pearls, she’ll have the police on your trail.”

“No she won’t,” Doris said. “I’ve

phoned her and told her that I left the pearls at Tiffington’s. She believed me and told me to take the afternoon off.”

“Good!” Hartley’s tone became admonishing. “I merely sent Doyle here dressed as an officer to convince you that you couldn’t get away from me. I think you are convinced .of that now.”

“I haven’t any doubt of it,” said Doris bitterly. “I’m just like all the rest that you’ve caught in your miserable trap. You’ve been clever, Jeff, using that swank employment agency of yours as a blind. Half the girls and women on your lists are completely honest. They haven’t any idea there is anything wrong.”

“Quite true.” Hartley nodded cynically. “But you are not one of them, Doris. Nor was Nancy Parker.”

“No—you’re right, Jeff. We had our orders when you secured us positions with rich families. We were to learn where those people kept their cash and jewels, report to you. Then you’d send some of your crew of second-story men to rob them.”

JEFFERSON HARTLEY’S ego swelled. “And the police have never even suspected that those robberies were committed at my orders!”

He glanced at the small rug on which Doris was standing, then frowned and stooped over to tie his shoelace.

“I’ve planned things quite well so far,” he boasted. Suddenly he grabbed the edge of the rug and gave it a quick jerk. Doris was standing on the rug’s far end. Her feet shot out from beneath her and she fell to the floor. Doyle leaped at her and wrenched the automatic from her hand. Then he yanked her roughly to her feet.

“That’s better,” Hartley sneered as he stood erect. “Poor girl—her troubles have put her mentally off balance. She came here to this hotel, registered under an

assumed name with just one thought in mind—and that was suicide.”

“Suicide!” Doris gazed at him in horror.

“Of course, my dear,” he said smoothly. “When I came here and accused you of having stolen my wallet with five hundred dollars, something snapped in your mind. Before I could stop you—although I tried hard—you committed suicide, by jumping out the window.”

Doris’ hand flew to her mouth.

“Very nice, boss,” said Doyle gruffly. “You sure figure things out swell.” His grip tightened on the girl. “Shall I drop her out the window?”

“Just a minute.” Hartley went to an open window and looked out. “An air shaft with the blank wall of a building opposite,” he said. “Fine.”

“Now?” asked Doyle, putting one hand across Doris’ mouth as the girl tried to scream.

He lifted her to carry her toward the window.

“Is this it, boss?”

“This is it,” said Hartley. “And good riddance.”

Neither man heard the door of the room open. Neither of them saw J. Martin Stover standing there with an automatic in his hand and the air of a man familiar with firearms.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Stover warned. “I’m afraid that you gentlemen play too rough.”

Hartley and Doyle spun on their heels. The head of the Hartley Placement Bureau cursed a blue streak as he saw the little man with the gun. Fright swept over Hartley’s face when he took in the group of blue-coated figures in the hall behind Stover.

“Put her down, Doyle,” Stover snapped, and his voice was hard.

Doyle released the girl and Doris drew

quickly away from him.

She turned to Stover.

“I was afraid Mrs. Gibson might not tell you where I was when I phoned her, Martin,” the girl said.

“But she did, Doris,” explained Stover. “Told me that you were here at the hotel, so I came here at once and brought a squad with me. We’ve been listening outside the door, taking down the conversation in short hand. We have enough on Hartley now to charge him with murder.”

“Murder!” Hartley exclaimed. “I haven’t murdered anyone!”

“But you ordered it done,” Stover charged. “A week ago Mrs. Gibson got in touch with the police. Smart woman, Mrs. Gibson. Much brighter than she looks and acts. She felt there was something wrong when Nancy Parker told her she was leaving to go home and get married.”

“Why should there be anything wrong about that?” Hartley demanded. His face was damp with sweat.

“Nancy Parker was quite self-conscious because of the scar on her left cheek. She had told Mrs. Gibson that she had never had a romance in her life. Poor girl. Besides, Mrs. Gibson identified the body of the young woman who was fished out of the East River a week ago. At the police’s request, there was no publicity.

“You’ve been a little fatuous, Jeff Hartley,” Doris added coldly. “The police suspected you fully three months ago. That’s why I let you ‘discover’ there was something in my past that I was trying to cover up, when I first came to you seeking employment.

“Through that phony evidence, you felt you had a hold on me. That made me eligible to work with you on these ‘special jobs’.”

“Exactly,” said J. Martin Stover. “We’ve been watching you for some time, Hartley. Every crook is a sucker at heart.

This was just your day.”

HARTLEY glared at the little man,
“We? You mean—”

“Martin Stover is an ace plainclothesman in the Detective Bureau,” Doris said. “Not that he looks like one, exactly.”

Stover grinned.

“Unflattering but true,” he admitted. “And this little lady here is one of the best policewomen in the department. You see, Mrs. Gibson engaged Doris today at my suggestion.”

Hartley began to paw the air.

“A frameup!” he screamed.

“Take it easy, boss,” advised Doyle, the phony policeman. “We’re both a couple of dead ducks now.”

“That’s right.” Stover’s face hardened. “The Nancy Parker murder. You talked yourself into that!”

Raving, Hartley was led, away, with Doyle plodding unhappily at his heels. Stover turned to the girl.

“Look, Doris. We owe Mrs. Gibson a little social visit, after the little social blunder Hartley pulled. She did a good turn for us today.”

“Social visit!” Doris snorted. “You mean, you want a crack at some of the Scotch in the butler’s pantry.”

“Did I say no?” Stover grinned.