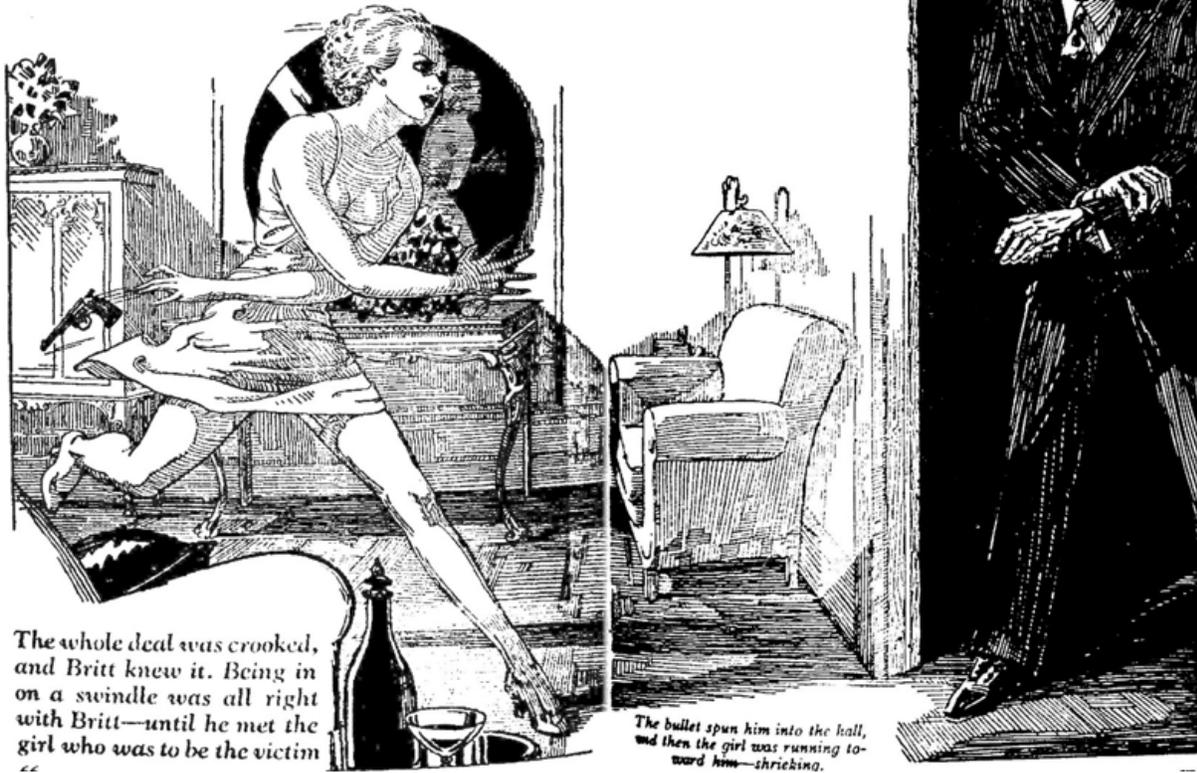


# Women Are Damned Fools

By JUSTIN CASE



*The whole deal was crooked, and Britt knew it. Being in on a swindle was all right with Britt—until he met the girl who was to be the victim*

“EXCUSE me,” Britt said, and got up. He trailed the butler into the hall and said thanks when the man handed him the telephone. After a moment of listening he said into the instrument: “Well, what of it? Since when have you been leery of that flatfoot?”

“Callagan’s no flatfoot,” Adele Mamon said, “and he’s in Newport.”

Britt put the phone down and walked back

to the drawing-room where Ruth St. Clair was reclining on the divan with her eyes closed and her lips a little puckered, as if she were humming a tune to herself. Lamplight leaned over her pale shoulders and put shadows in the soft, smooth curves of her exquisite figure. Her gown was an expensive creation that revealed every beautiful contour of her glorious body.

There was something fine about Ruth St. Clair. Something damned desirable. It was almost a gyp to be playing her for underhanded

reasons.

Britt took time to light a cigarette. It would be hell, he thought, if Callagan talked.

He strolled to the divan and sat down. "You're lovely," he said. "Has anyone ever told you—?" He stopped and watched the girl's slumberous eyes open, and felt suddenly as if those eyes knew everything. There was something strange about this girl. After four weeks he was still in the hands-off stage, not because she had said so but because he simply couldn't see himself mauling her.

Queer, that. No other girl kept him so aloof after four weeks.

"Do you think I'm lovely?" she asked, smiling.

It was the way she said it He bent over quickly and took her in his arms, and her moist, trembling lips were suddenly fused with his own.

He held her savagely. The tips of his fingers tingled. He could sense her avid, breathtaking response . . . could feel the whole of her entrancingly feminine body quivering with unleashed emotion. If he yielded even for an instant to his own mad yearnings, he would make a horrible mess of everything.

He stiffened and put his feet under him. "I've got to go," he muttered. "Got to."

He lit a cigarette and knew that his hands were shaking but couldn't control them. Nothing had ever made them shake before—even the night he had threatened to break with Adele and she had cursed him and aimed a revolver at him. He had laughed in Adele's face that night—but you couldn't laugh in Ruth St. Clair's face.

It was a mess, clear through, and it hurt like hell.

"Tomorrow!" he said desperately.

"Of course," she whispered. "Hasn't it been tomorrow every day for—for how long, Jim?"

He could have told her how long. Too long. But she had her hands out and he lifted her up,

drew her close to him. The room blurred. He stood with his arms crushing the slender softness of her to him, his mouth in her hair.

He felt drunk, but it was not from liquor. "God, I love you!" he said huskily, then turned and almost ran.

HE had learned a lot about Ruth St. Clair in four weeks, yet knew nothing that other men did not know or have the right to know. With Adele it was different. He knew the smooth feel of Adele's skin and the shape of her body. He knew that she always got up in the morning with a headache and bad breath and insisted on a shot of straight rye before breakfast.

He knew that she preferred diaphanous step-ins and could never find a girdle to fit comfortably because they all rolled at the top. He knew the kind of toothpaste she used, and the kind of mouthwash, and the two kinds of perfume.

He really knew nothing at all about Ruth St. Clair. Nothing like that, anyway. She could swim gloriously in her crimson bathing-suit and could dive with consummate grace from the deck-rail of her father's yacht. She danced the way angels might dance, and men argued for the privilege of putting an arm around her—but not too far around—on the dance floor. Funny how he knew so much and yet so little.

He thought of Adele's soft, limp body sprawled and unattractive, and of Ruth St. Clair at the wheel of her dad's speed-boat with spray in her face and her lips laughing.

He thought of Ruth saying, "Hasn't it been tomorrow every day!" and of Adele snarling, as she usually did when she awoke in the morning: "For God's sake leave me alone. I've got a head."

ST. CLAIR had money—more than most of Newport's pseudo-millionaires ever hoped to have. In a day or two he'd be losing a lot

of it to Macy and Williams, big-time crooks who were in Providence calling themselves real estate men. St. Clair was going to purchase a swanky resort club, on the east coast of Florida, which he'd never even seen. He was a sap and was going to pay for being one.

Macy and Williams didn't own the Sandemar Kaston Club. They hadn't built it. But they were armed with references, photographs, and legal documents that looked genuine, and the Sandemar Kaston Club actually did exist and actually had cost four millions to build. They were smooth workers. They'd tossed out bait in the form of Jim Britt, who had crashed Newport society as the scion of a wealthy and respectable family.

Jim Britt had talked Florida. Talked it high, wide, and handsome and shown photographs of the Sandemar Kaston Club, of its eighteen beautiful holes of golf, its magnificent polo field, its private inland waterway and airplane hangars. Jim Britt had talked to St. Clair's daughter and to St. Clair himself, not as a salesman but as a friend and social equal. Warily he had imparted the information, not to be spread wholesale, that the Sandemar Kaston Club could be purchased for one eighth of its original cost, if St. Clair was interested.

Tomorrow or the next day, St. Clair would put cash on the line. Later he'd put more cash on the same line, and Jim Britt would make sure that he stayed out of Florida until the deal was completed. Then Macy, Williams, and Jim Britt would skip town; and when St. Clair went to look over his Florida property he'd find himself surveying a once magnificent enterprise which for the past six years had been going to ruin—buildings hurricane-wrecked, polo field and golf course choked with weeds, everything else utterly worthless. And he wouldn't even own that.

**T**HE thing settled down on Jim Britt thick and heavy as a winding sheet as he drove

savagely along the road to Providence. Even if he broke with Adele, if he threw up the deal and walked out on Macy and Williams, he couldn't have Ruth St. Clair. The dirt would be out in the open then, and instead of being pay-dirt it would be filth on the floor of a prison cell. St. Clair would see to that.

He crossed the Mount Hope Bridge at terrific speed and pulled a bottle from the door-pocket while the toll-taker was making change. He stuck the snout of the bottle in his mouth and let the stuff gurgle over his tongue.

He hadn't been drunk in two months, and it was the only way now to get things straightened out.

What time it was when he got back to Providence, to the apartment, he didn't know. He had been in a dozen places since leaving Ruth St. Clair in Newport. He'd been to Tony's in Pawtucket, drinking Tony's good beer and vile 'shine and eating pickled eggs to keep from passing out.

He'd been to Kelly's place on the Pike and had gone to sleep there on the divan. Kelly had introduced him to a girl, because Kelly was the sort of mugg who thought that a girl could cure anything.

Later he had gone down to Mangan's riding school and straddled one of Mangan's worst "stinkers" for three hours. But this whole thing was a mist, fogged with bad liquor and drunken bums singing songs and telling filthy stories. It was daylight now and he was at the apartment. And Adele would be there waiting for him because he was a day, or two days, or three days, late.

She was at the door, holding it open, before he succeeded in getting his key into the lock. She had on yellow pajamas and a lavender dressing-gown that revealed the lilting curves beneath.

She took his wrist and jerked him inside so savagely that he stumbled. Then she closed the door and stood with her back to it and glared at

him.

“Well, where’ve you been?” she said acidly.

He stared at her. The rippling curves of her mature body didn’t intoxicate him now. He had no desire to caress her or push his mouth against hers. He walked groggily to a chair.

“Macy was up here,” Adele declared, “and wanted to talk to you. Where’ve you been?”

“Drunk,” he said.

“That’s just like you. Go off and leave me alone to rot here. Just because you finish a deal, you think—”

“I didn’t finish it,” he said thickly, “and I’m not going to.”

“You’re not—what?”

“I’m through.”

She studied him. She had eyes like the black ends of revolvers, Adele did, and a mind keener than a bullet. At last she said: “What did that broad do to you?”

It was to Britt’s credit that he did not associate the word “broad” with Ruth St. Clair. He said “Who?” before he realized that Adele was wise.

“Don’t stall!” she fairly screamed. “What’d that St. Clair dame do to you?”

“Plenty.”

“And what does that make me?”

“I’ll tell you what it makes you.” He stood up and groped for a cigarette. He was drunk, very drunk, but he could still think straight and had been thinking along the same lines for hours. “We’re through, see?” he said grimly. “We’re finished. I don’t care a small damn for you or for any of the filthy crowd you throw me into. The St. Clair deal is off. Everything’s off.”

Her eyes smouldered. She took a cigarette and lit it, and the smoke from her nostrils curled down around her breasts. “And what’s the rest of it?”

“There isn’t any rest. I just came back to say goodbye.”

She understood, then. She stepped slowly toward him and put her arms around his neck

while he stood rigid. “You’re just drunk,” she said softly. “You’ll get over it, Jim. You’re just drunk, that’s all.”

Her arms tightened avidly as she reached up to kiss him. Her mouth, hot and wet and eager, would have fastened hungrily on his own if he had not jerked away.

He pushed her. “I’ll be seeing you,” he shrugged, “in hell. Goodbye.”

HE found that he could walk fairly straight and he felt good, knowing that he was leaving this place for the last time and wouldn’t have to come back. He reached out and put a hand on the doorknob.

“Wait a minute, big boy,” Adele said behind him.

He turned and saw that she had a revolver in her hand. Her breasts were heaving tumultuously and her eyes were like blazing coals, but she was smiling and her voice was level as she said: “Sit down. I want to talk to you.”

“Thanks. I’d rather stand,” he replied.

“Sit down, I said!”

“I can hear pretty well standing.”

“All right, damn you, get a load of this. You’re not leaving me. You’re going in the other room and go to bed, and sleep it off.”

“Sorry,” Britt said, “but—”

“If you open that door I’ll let you have it.”

He opened the door. He didn’t care particularly whether she had the nerve or not. It would be an easy way out of the whole mess.

He stepped over the threshold and heard Adele, behind him, scream out: “Damn you, I told, you!” There was a sullen roar and something spun him crazily into the hall.

He stood on braced legs, swaying. His sleeve was ripped and blood was spurting from a gash underneath, and Adele was running toward him, shrieking words that were only half coherent.

“I didn’t mean it, Jim! Oh God, I—I—”

She caught him with both hands and stared up into his face. She was crying and choking at the same time, and her fingers were wet with the blood on his arm. He let her stay there a moment, then pushed her away.

“Okay,” he said. “I don’t blame you.” Then he turned and walked to the head of the stairs and Adele stood very still, very stiff, staring after him, her hands and breasts smeared with blood and her body trembling violently.

HE took a small apartment on the East Side and three days later, in the afternoon, the doorbell buzzed. It was small, fat-faced Macy, with a greasy hand out-stretched and an enigmatical smile on his wet lips. Macy grunted himself into a chair and did some staring.

“What’s the idea,” he demanded, “walkin’ out on us?”

Britt said: “If you’ve got something to say, say it.”

“Well,” Macy grunted, “what you do is up to you, I guess. Only we had another job lined up and we could use you. Here’s your dough.”

He held out a flat wad of bills. “We’d feel safer,” he said, “if you’d hang around Newport a while longer to make sure St. Clair don’t get any wild ideas about leaving for Florida, but I guess there ain’t much danger. Keep in touch with us. You don’t have to hook up with Adele again. That’s your business, not ours.”

Britt took the money. He didn’t hear what Macy was saying; he knew it was St. Clair’s money and the deal had gone through. St. Clair had not taken the hint when he, Jim Britt, had failed to show up that next day as per appointment. He had gone to Macy’s office and coughed up.

“This is just a split,” Macy said, “of what the dope put down on deposit. He signed everything we shoved under his nose. When we begin puttin’ the screws to him, you’ll get more. Meanwhile this other job I was talkin’ about—”

“Get out,” Britt snapped. He wanted to

smash Macy’s face in. “I’ll phone you if I want any more.”

Macy stood up, shrugged, and walked to the door. “Don’t spend all that dough on a dame,” he said. He thought he was being funny.

Jim Britt counted the money—twenty-five hundred dollars of it, one third of the down payment St. Clair had made toward ownership of the Sandemar Kaston Club. Macy and Williams had the rest, and they hadn’t even begun to work on St. Clair yet.

He paced the room for the best part of an hour. Then he seized the telephone, called the St. Clair home in Newport and asked for Mr. St. Clair.

A maid’s voice answered: “Mr. St. Clair is not in. May I take your number and have him call you back?”

“It’s important,” Britt said thickly. “Take a message.”

“Yes, sir.” There was a pause. “Just a moment, sir. Miss St. Clair will speak to you.”

Britt gagged. He said, “No, no!” savagely, but it was too late; Ruth St. Clair’s voice was already eating into his brain. Good God, he didn’t want to talk to her now! Not with what he had to say!

“Listen,” he mumbled. “I—” Suddenly he caught himself, spoke slowly and gutturally in a voice not his own. She wouldn’t know him. “A friend of your father is speaking, Miss. No, I prefer not to give the name. Tell him, please, that he must absolutely not pay another cent to Macy and Williams, the brokers. The whole deal is crooked. He must sign no more papers.”

“Crooked?” Her voice seemed all at once high and shrill, as if her breasts were swelling with sucked-in breath and her face had whitened.

“Everyone connected with the deal is crooked.” Jim Britt muttered. Then he hung up and pushed the hair out of his face.

He was soaking wet with perspiration. When he turned and walked across the room, it didn’t

seem to matter whether he got there or not.

He put on his coat and hat and went out, drove downtown to Fountain Street and then remembered what time it was. Macy wouldn't be at the office this late; he'd be home in his apartment, or out on a time.

There was no answer at the apartment. Britt let himself in with his own key, went up and opened Macy's door. He called Macy's name, then went in and shut the door behind him. For a while he sat in a chair, waiting. When it was after one o'clock he walked into the bedroom and stretched out. He was tired.

**W**HEN he awoke, he heard voices and looked at his wrist-watch. It was four in the morning. One of the voices belonged to Macy, the other to Adele. He listened a while, then got off the bed and strode into the adjoining room.

Adele and Macy were on the sofa and Adele was wearing a flimsy slip instead of a dress. The girl had her arms laced around Macy's fat neck. Macy, startled pulled his mouth away from hers. He swung around and snarled: "Say! What is this?"

Jim Britt said without emotion: "Get up, Macy. You're coming with me."

"The hell I am," Macy snarled.

"We're doing business at the office. Get moving."

Adele stood up, red-faced and infuriated, and put her hands on her hips. The fact that she was without her dress seemed not to bother her, and she made no attempt to cover the abundance of white skin that lay exposed to Britt's gaze. "You can't get away with this," she said.

Macy found his feet, stalled and fumbled with his shoelace until Britt stepped forward and stood over him. When he was dressed, Britt pushed him toward the door.

Adele blocked the way angrily. "You've got no strings on me," she fumed. "Just because I came here with Macy, you can't take him away

and—"

"I don't care if you come here the rest of your life," Britt said.

He closed the door in her face and she opened it again and stood there, oblivious of her scanty attire, watching as he and Macy descended the stairs. Outside, Macy climbed into the car and sat stiff.

**M**ACY was nervous. He watched the road and trembled whenever a passing car threw lights in to his face. He was more than nervous when the door of his own office closed after him and Britt pushed him to a chair.

Standing on wide-spread legs Britt said grimly: "The St. Clair deal is off. I want the papers he signed and the money he handed over."

Macy's silence gave way to sputtering upheaval. "You can't do it! You're crazy!"

"Open up," Britt said, pointing to the safe.

Macy's vehemence became a gurgling whimper. He stood up, trembling. He turned his back and began fumbling with the safe door.

When he turned around again he was holding a portfolio in one hand and a snub-nosed automatic in the other, and Britt's fist was already beginning a vicious parabola. Macy thudded backward into the wall and slid down on buckled knees, with blood gushing from his mouth. Automatic and papers fell out of his hands.

Britt retrieved the papers and stood over him. "It was a pleasure," Britt said.

He pawed through the safe and convinced himself that there were no more papers with St. Clair's name on them. Then he turned to the door.

The door opened in his face. Williams was standing there—big, blundering Williams, blowing like a porpoise from too much haste and excitement. He gaped with popping eyes and peered past Britt to the sprawled figure on the floor. He stuck one beefy hand into his

pocket.

Britt hauled him in with one hand and let him have it. It was again a pleasure. Looking down at the job he had done, he said softly: "I suppose Adele put you wise. Give her my love."

He went out, leaving Macy and Williams unconscious.

Driving over the Mount Hope, he tried to kid himself into believing that he was doing it for St. Clair. But he knew different. He could have left the money and the papers at any banks and St. Clair could have called for them after being notified.

But that would have killed Jim Britt's last chance of seeing Ruth St. Clair again.

He stopped the car. St. Clair's house loomed big and black at the end of the road and showed no lights in the darkness. Britt prowled across the lawn, found the window of St. Clair's office and went to work on it.

He'd see the thing through to a finish. Decency demanded it. And there was a slim chance—a very slim chance—that he'd get to see Ruth.

He slid the window up and crawled under it, stood motionless and peered around him. Scowling, he tiptoed to the desk, took a long envelope from his pocket and placed the envelope on the desk blotter.

He walked back to the window and stood staring.

**W**ELL, what had he expected? At five in the morning to find Ruth St. Clair sitting up waiting for him? Or was he supposed to tip a chair over, so she could come running and catch him red-handed and call him honest and wonderful for bringing back the loot which he had stolen in the first place! Hooey!

He strode back to the desk scooped up a pencil end wrote in large letters across the envelope: JIM BRITT.

On the way home he muttered: "You damned fool!"

He did a lot of thinking when he got back. The money, for instance. Returning it didn't mean a thing, not when you were the crook who'd stolen it. They'd given him plenty of time to think that over, with a concrete floor under his feet. He didn't have enough left to pay a lawyer.

Better scam. Forget about Ruth St. Clair and try for a getaway.

It was ten in the morning. He was fumbling with the cover of a suitcase when someone knocked on the door. He jerked back, turned. It couldn't be—

It wasn't. It was Callagan, big, red-faced Callagan, the dick. The choking sensation went out of Britt's throat and he shrugged his shoulders, said without emotion: "Well?"

"Been up all night?" Callagan said.

"If I have?"

"Thought maybe you'd be too tired to talk about St. Clair."

Britt shrugged. "You don't get any credit, Callagan. You're just as dumb as ever. If you hadn't been tipped off—"

"I been keeping tabs on Macy and Williams for a long while," Callagan declared. "This morning I took 'em in, and they mentioned your name. Sore about something."

"You didn't get this from Miss St. Clair?"

"Never heard of the St. Clairs until Macy and Williams blabbed," Callagan said.

"You were in Newport."

"For the week-end, fishing."

Britt leaned back, exhaling slowly. It was a queer wind-up. Callagan had been tabbing Macy and Williams because they were crooks, but he hadn't known a thing about Jim Britt or about the St. Clair affair. Now he knew everything. "The boss wants to see you," Callagan said.

**B**RITT stood up. He was not looking at the detective; he stood up for something else entirely. His heart was sledging furiously

and he knew his face was turning white. He stared at the door and said to Callagan: "Stand up, flatfoot. There's a lady present."

He wondered why she had come. Had she found the envelope on her father's desk? Stiffly he introduced her to Callagan.

Ruth St. Clair said, smiling: "A detective?"

"Yeah," Callagan admitted. "I'm here to—"

"I think I know." She took Britt's hand and hung onto it. To Callagan she said softly: "We owe a great deal to Mr. Britt. When dad first considered putting his affairs into the hands of Macy and Williams, it was Mr. Britt who warned us against it. Dad is a stubborn old fool and wouldn't believe the truth. Mr. Britt had to show him."

"Had to *what*?" Callagan gasped.

"Jim's been working on the inside for quite some time, as dad's personal representative," Ruth St. Clair said deliberately. "He phoned me last night to say he had positive proof that the deal was crooked; but it was too late—dad had already signed an atrocious number of papers and paid out some money. Last night Jim returned the papers and money after forcing Macy and Williams to give them up. We were intending to take the affair to court as soon as Jim had finished his investigation."

"Huh!" Callagan said.

"However, now that you have Macy and Williams on other charges—"

Callagan massaged his chin and looked over the angle of his hand into Ruth St. Clair's face. He allowed his frown to twist into a slow grin. "That," he said, "is on the level?"

"Certainly," she smiled. "And we're grateful for your assistance, Mr. Callagan. Dad will send his thanks through the mail, I'm sure."

Callagan stood up. He was an old hand; he knew the ropes. "I'll be going," he said, and was careful to close the door after him.

Jim Britt sagged into a chair. Ruth St. Clair strolled to the table and leaned there and looked at him.

"You should be in the fiction business." Britt said lamely.

She came and stood over him. She said: "should I?"

"Did you have any particular reason for doing it?"

"A reason so particular that—" She bent over and would have put her lips against his. He stiffened and held her away. He couldn't look at her. She was smiling and happy, and the sight of her boiled all the sickness inside him.

He wanted her, wanted that exquisitely slender body in his arms, crushed hard against him. But he knew better than to hope.

"You don't know the whole mess," he said thickly. "I've been in it for two years."

"Does it matter?"

"Matter! Good God—"

Ruth St. Clair listened to him. He paced from one wall to another blurting out what was eating him. He stood very still and stared at her.

"There was a girl. A girl named Adele."

She went to him and held his arms, then put her warm, eager lips against his and deliberately pulled his arms about her waist. Her body fused with his and the warmth from it crept into him.

Finally she whispered: "You mean there used to be a girl named Adele. Now there's a girl named Ruth."