



System

By
JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of
“Lo, the Poor White Man,”
“My Friend, Peterssen,” etc.

THE police captain looked up with a yawn as the door of his private office opened and closed. “Oh, that you, lieutenant? Thought it was Clieve—he phoned he’d be in around midnight. Sit down.”

He pushed a box of cigars toward the other, who removed his gloves and tucked them inside the cap, which he placed, crown down, upon the table. Drawing a chair into position, the lieutenant seated himself and bit the end from a cigar.

“Wise as hell, wasn’t he—the commissioner,” he remarked, “going outside the force for his private pussyfoots? Wonder where he thought Slade’s agency got its men?” He regarded the captain through a haze of blue smoke. “Some commissioners wouldn’t go outside the force,” he added thoughtfully.

The captain glanced up quickly. Their eyes met.

“Meaning?” he suggested.

The lieutenant shrugged. “Nothing—only if your shoe pinches you’d better throw it away and get one that don’t, even if it’s a new one.”

“He hasn’t been in a month.”

“A month, or a day—what difference does it make? He’s been in long enough to show that he’s going to make it damned uncomfortable for—some folks.”

The captain glanced toward the door, picked up the telephone and called the outer office. “Hello, Coulter. When Clieve comes in tell him to

wait there—I’m busy.” Crossing the room he turned the key in the lock and resumed his seat. “How about the mayor? Carston is his commissioner, you know.”

The lieutenant smiled. “The mayor is new at the game himself. He’s out to make good. Ain’t he been handing it out through the papers that he’s there to do things—not to talk? Suppose, now, he was to get something on his brand new commissioner and fire him? It would be nuts for him—he’d be doing things.”

“What good would it do? He’d just appoint another—they’re all for reform nowadays—the high-brows.”

“That’s just the reason I was thinking that maybe if we could work in some one that wasn’t a high-brow, it would be better—for the force.”

“I don’t get you.”

“Well, there’s—me, for instance. I ain’t a high-brow—been on the force twenty years, and got a good record.”

The captain stared at him in amazement.

“You don’t mean that you are thinking of getting appointed police commissioner!” he exclaimed. “Are you crazy?”

“Not so you could prove it,” smiled the other. “That’s just exactly what I do mean—and you are the boy that’s got to put the flea in his honor’s ear.”

The captain continued to stare. “But—why, they wouldn’t stand for it!”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“The people.”

The lieutenant made a motion of contempt.

“Hell! They’ll stand for anything,” he growled. “Most of ‘em will fall for it. Listen here, does this sound reasonable, or don’t it? It’s what you’ve got to put up to the mayor when the time comes. Why put a civilian at the head of a police force? What do they know about police business? Here’s men trained in police work—men that have put in most of their lives at it, and that know it from the ground up, and yet you stick in a civilian because he’s a good lawyer, or a good button-maker, to tell them how to run the force. If you wanted to tunnel the river, would you get a barber to boss the job? Or, if you got sick, would you send for a motorman?”

“That’s all right—but how you going to get rid of the commissioner? It’s pretty risky business—butting in on the big ones.”

“You’re sure of Clieve, ain’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And Holden?”

“Yes, they’re ours, all right.”

“Then you listen to me.” For an hour the lieutenant talked, and the captain listened, interrupting at intervals with a question, an objection or an observation.

Then the lieutenant went away, and the captain phoned for Clieve.

II

Daylight was beginning to pale the electrics when the officer once more called the outer office.

“Send a man out to hunt ‘Spanish Mary,’” he ordered. “I want to see her.”

Spanish Mary, be it known, was a character in the underworld. A product of the slums who unostentatiously gathered the “leathers” of the bourgeoisie—and paid well for the privilege. An hour later the girl entered the captain’s room unannounced. Presently the officer looked up and cleared his throat roughly.

“Why hello, Mary!”

“Ain’t you surprised?” she said ironically. “And busy, too! You’d oughtn’t to work so hard, cap. It’s bad for your health.”

The officer grinned as his blue eyes rested in

frank admiration upon the regular lines of the face with the soft, richly tinted skin, and its aureole of jet-black hair. “You ain’t working enough to hurt your health any,” he retorted. “What’s the matter with you, retired—or tied up with a meal-ticket?”

The black eyes flashed scornfully. “You know as well as I do, I put in three weeks in the hospital, and I ain’t worked any since. Somehow, I ain’t felt up to it.”

“That’s ancient history. You were discharged a month ago.”

“But I ain’t been working, I tell you.”

“That’s what I’m getting at.”

“You mean, I’ve got to—”

“Kick in.” The words rasped short and harsh, and the girl winced and shook her head wearily.

“I can’t,” she faltered, “I’m broke.”

The gruff voice took on a more kindly tone. “Look here, Mary, buck up. You were sick, I know that, and I ain’t going to be hard on you. But it’s seven weeks since you’ve showed anything. You ain’t sick now, and it’s time you were back on the job. There ain’t any one laying off of me—I’ve got to come across, same as always, and they’re gouging me deep.”

The girl nodded.

“I suppose so,” she answered indifferently. “I’ve got to start some time. It might as well be now.”

“That’s the talk. We’ll say about fifty to start in on. I don’t want to crowd you. You’ll strike your gait again before long. Just see that you come across inside of twenty-four hours, though.”

The girl crossed to the door. With her hand on the knob she turned. “And if I don’t?”

The officer laughed shortly. “The trains still run up the river. You won’t need to bother to pack your grip, though. The State will furnish your clothes.”

When she had gone he drummed thoughtfully upon the desk with his fingers. “If it works, I’m an inspector. And if it don’t—well, twenty-four years of it haven’t left me a pauper, by a hundred thousand or so.”

III

Late that same afternoon Clieve, private detective to the police commissioner, tapped at the

door of a two-room apartment, third floor front, in a tenement house east of Third Avenue. The door opened a scant two inches and Clieve saw that it was secured by means of a chain. Saw, also, that a woman was regarding him intently through the narrow aperture and his eyes lighted with approval as they rested for a moment upon the dark beauty of her.

"Are you Spanish Mary?" he asked.

"Who are you?" came the counter-question.

"Let me in. I've got something to tell you. I'm here to put you hep."

"Who are you? And what are you talking about? Go on away from here. I never saw you before."

Clieve placed his lips close to the opening. "I'm from the commissioner himself. Let me in and I'll tell you. You can trust me."

From beyond the door come a gurgle of laughter. "I'm trusting you all right, as long as this chain holds—that's as far as I'd trust any dick. Say it from there, bo."

"Suit yourself," replied Clieve with a show of indifference. "The commissioner wants to see you."

"Gee, I'm getting popular with the big ones all to once! What's the game?"

"He'll tell you that himself. Take a taxi to—you know where he lives—apartment D." The man slipped a bill through the aperture.

The girl hesitated. "How do I know you're from the commissioner? And what does he want with me?"

Clieve stepped closer and turned back the lapel of his coat. "Just lamp that. I'm on the job. I happen to know that you were jerked up for a kick-in this morning, and that you couldn't come across. The commissioner's whetting up his ax, and he wants the dope first hand—get me?"

"You mean——"

"I mean, you show up at eight o'clock and you'll learn a lot of things that'll surprise you."

The girl took the bill, and Clieve turned and made his way down the dark stairway.

Promptly on the stroke of eight a taxi swung to the curb before the door of an Eighty-fourth Street apartment-house. Spanish Mary alighted and crossed the side-walk. Clieve was awaiting her, and the two stepped into the elevator, which moved noiselessly upward. A moment later the

girl found herself standing in a carpeted hall while the detective pressed a pearl button set into the wall beside a heavy mahogany door. The door opened and a servant conducted them through a long hall into a large room, where a wood fire burned cheerfully in a huge fireplace.

"This is the young woman I told you about, sir—Spanish Mary," announced Clieve, and withdrew.

A tall, gray-haired man arose from an easy chair and greeted her, smiling. "Good evening, Miss—Mary." The girl glanced warily into the kindly eyes as the man continued: "Just throw off your wraps and sit here before the fire."

As she sank into the proffered chair, her eyes roved about the expensively furnished room. The commissioner himself closed the door and returned to the fire.

"Just forget," he began, "that you are talking to a police official. We are alone here, and whatever you see fit to tell me will be held in strict confidence."

"What's the game? What do you want of me?"

The commissioner noted an undertone of suspicion in the girl's voice.

"The game, as you call it, is this: The mayor of this city has seen fit to appoint me his police commissioner. Having accepted the appointment, I intend to administer the affairs of the department to the best of my ability. The people have the right to hold me responsible for the condition of the department during the term of my administration. My belief is that if there are rotten spots in the force, it is because the commissioner allows them to be rotten. If you find that there are certain rotten apples in your barrel of apples, the sooner you get rid of the rotten ones the better. If you don't get rid of them your whole barrel is in danger. Rot spreads."

The girl was listening intently with her dark eyes on the commissioner's face. "Your barrel's stood too long, cap," she observed dryly. "You'd better just roll it in the river."

"No, no! It is not as bad as that. You have evidently come in contact with the worst."

"I hope I have," she answered bitterly.

"I believe that the great mass of the force is honest."

Spanish Mary shook her head. "Tell it to

Sweeney!”

“To whom?”

“Oh, that’s just a way of speaking—like your barrel of apples. You and me don’t talk just alike, but we can get each other at that. I wasn’t born in a minute, and since then I’ve lived like I had to live. I sized you up for a square guy the minute I lamped you. And, believe me, you’re in the wrong pew. You’re up against something that’s bigger than you are—bigger than any man—the system. Take it from me, bo, if you want to hold your job, lay off them—they’ll get you!”

The commissioner leaned forward, and the kindly eyes looked into the dark ones gravely. “I don’t want to hold my job if in order to hold it I have to wink at graft, and close my eyes to crookedness. I did not seek this position—it was urged upon me, and I accepted it as a matter of duty. From a financial standpoint, I am losing money every day I hold it.”

“You won’t lose much,” said the girl wisely. “I can see your finish.”

The commissioner returned her smile. “I am afraid you are pessimistic. At least I have nothing to fear. The mayor and the district attorney are with me. If crookedness exists we will stamp it out.”

The girl shook her head. “The mayor has been in a month, the district attorney a couple of years, and you’re newer yet. But the system has been going on for years.”

“Everything has an end.”

“Yes, and when everything ends, the system will end. How do you know you ain’t up against a plant right now?”

“A plant?”

“Yes, a plant. How do you know I ain’t been sent here to get your goat?”

The commissioner comprehended the reference to the goat. He smiled. “If such were the case, you would hardly suggest it. When Clieve reported your predicament to me I decided to send for you. The police, of course, know nothing of it. I can trust Clieve and Holden implicitly.”

“You can’t trust no one that’s a dick,” maintained the girl stubbornly.

The commissioner waived the point. “Now I want to ask you some questions, and I want you to answer me promptly and honestly. I think you feel that you can believe me when I tell you that

nothing you may say shall be used in any way against you. Some of the questions may seem personal and impertinent, but you must remember I am trying to secure evidence, not against you, but against the grafters in the police force, if any exist.”

“Go ahead. You can’t hurt my feelings none.”

“In the first place, if you have paid certain moneys to any one connected with the police, kindly state as nearly as you can, the amount, to whom it was paid, and why.”

Spanish Mary smiled. “The easiest to answer is the last part of it,” she said. “I pay so the dicks won’t bother me while I work the hotels, theatres, and subway stations between Thirty-fourth Street and the park.”

“What do you mean by ‘work’?”

“I am a dip. I work alone—bag-opening, mostly women’s hand-bags. I can’t tell nothing about how much I paid. It’s been fifty-fifty for going on four years. I work one night every week, sometimes two, and I gather anywhere from nothing up to a thousand or so.”

The commissioner was listening in horror. “And to whom do you pay this money?”

“Sometimes one and sometimes another. They’ve all got their mitts out.”

For upward of two hours he questioned, and jotted down answers. Toward the last he noticed an increasing nervousness on the girl’s part—an evident anxiety to be gone. At last she rose and adjusted her wraps. The commissioner made a gesture of protest. “Just a few moments.” He touched a button and a servant appeared in the doorway.

“A light luncheon, Grimes, please. You may serve it in here.”

The servant disappeared, and the girl hesitated. Then she shook her head. “No, no, I can’t. I’d like to stay, it’s so warm and comfortable here. A girl like me don’t often get the chance to feed in a swell joint like this. But I’ve got to go. The shows will be over in a few minutes and—well, if I don’t come across with fifty in the morning they’ll frame me for a stretch up the river.”

“Do you mean that you are going out, now— from here, and pick pockets to get money to hand over to the police—and that, under their own

orders!”

“You guessed it right, bo.”

“But surely if you refuse to do it they can’t—”

The girl interrupted him with a laugh.

“Oh, they can’t, can’t they? You can take it from me that if I don’t kick in tomorrow with that fifty, I’ll be pinched and stuck in stir, and when the grand jury meets they’ll have as pretty a case against me as ever you seen. Witnesses all rehearsed up to the letter—and it won’t be no Island case, neither—the cap said so.”

The servant, moving noiselessly, cleared a small table and covered it with a white square of linen. The commissioner was staring into the fire, and the girl watched the servant with interest. When he had withdrawn she returned to the official:

“Where’d you get the tabby-cat from?” she asked.

“The what?”

“Your hash-slinger. Seems like I’ve seen him before somewheres.”

The man seemed preoccupied. “Oh, I guess not,” he murmured without removing his gaze from the fire. “They look pretty much alike.”

The girl turned toward the door. “So long, cap,” she said. “I’ve got to blow.”

The commissioner looked up, and the girl saw that the kindly eyes were hard. “Wait! You say the police will frame you as you call it? Will have witnesses who will swear that you committed a crime tonight?”

“If I don’t come across in the morning, they will.”

He touched a different button and Clieve appeared. “Mark these bills for identification, and bring them back.” The detective took the money and withdrew from the room.

“Nix on that!” cried the girl in alarm. “Suppose we got the cap, what would the rest of ‘em do to me?”

“I will take care of you. We have the opportunity of a lifetime to strike directly at the root of the evil. If you are with me in this I give you my word you will never regret it.”

“But they’ll frame me just the same. It ain’t helping my case none. Because I give him marked bills I got off of you, ain’t no sign I didn’t gather a few leathers on the side.”

The commissioner smiled. “We can meet the

objections, I think. My wife and daughter are in Florida. You can occupy my daughter’s room. There are five witnesses here who can swear that you remained under this roof throughout the night. I am right; and right is bound to triumph.”

The girl placed her hand upon the back of the man’s chair. “And, take it from me, because you’re right, is the reason you’re going to hit the greased skids, bo. There’s only one right in this man’s town—right with the cops—and that’s wrong.”

“But you will help me in this? Help to crush out this systematized graft?”

“I’ll take a chance,” she agreed after a moment’s hesitation. “You’ve got further to drop than I have. I’ll sit in the game for a while, but I’ll hand it to you straight, if it comes to saving myself, some one else will have to worry about you.”

IV.

Early the following morning Clieve let himself noiselessly out of the commissioner’s apartment and, hastening to a telephone booth in a nearby drug store, held a long conversation with the captain of police. After which he returned to the apartment while the captain held a much longer colloquy with his honor, the mayor.

At nine o’clock Spanish Mary walked into the captain’s office. She stepped to the desk and counted out some bills.

“Take them up from there, and hold ‘em in your hand!” The girl stared into the captain’s glittering eyes as she complied.

“You fool! Do you think you could put anything over on me—throwing in with that high-brow commissioner? He’ll be in here in a minute—to catch me with the goods—with these marked bills. And there’ll be others here, too. He’s shot the shutes. With those bills there we’ve got him.”

“But Clieve marked the bills—he knows!” cried the girl.

The captain laughed. “Sure, he knows. Wait till you hear him tell it. Clieve’s Slade Agency man—he’s been working under my orders for years—Holden, too.” The man leaned closer, and with narrowed eyes, spoke rapidly. “Your ship’s

sinking, you rat! Come clean with me and you're all right—I ain't holding this against you. Play the fool, and you'll be an old woman before you'll get the chance to double-cross me again. We're going to stage a little show-down right here in this room. Three minutes after your commissioner walks through that door, the mayor will follow him in. Clieve and Holden will be here, too. And Graham—it's a wonder you didn't spot Graham, he's the commissioner's servant; Grimes, I think he calls him." A hidden buzzer purred softly, and the captain pointed to a chair. "Get into that, quick! He's coming."

The door opened abruptly and the commissioner entered, followed closely by Clieve and Holden. The dejected attitude of the girl, and the confident, almost patronizing greeting of the captain, caused a swift look of anxiety to flash into his eyes.

"Have you paid over the money?" he asked.

The figure shrank still farther into the chair. Her lips moved, but no words came.

"If you mean the money you paid her last night," said the captain with a sneer, "she still has it. The bills are marked, ain't they, Clieve?"

The commissioner whirled on the captain. "What do you mean?"

From the doorway sounded the voice of the mayor, coldly formal: "Hold your temper, please. Your case can only be injured by bluff and bluster."

"You here!" The commissioner faced the speaker. "Your presence is most opportune."

"So I believe," answered the city's chief executive dryly. "I am bitterly disappointed in you, William."

"Disappointed! In me?" The man regarded the mayor in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Yes, disappointed in you. In placing you at the head of the police department I thought I was selecting a man of sterling worth and the highest character."

"Proceed."

"I think the shorter we cut this, and the sooner you affix your signature to your resignation, the better it will be for all concerned."

"My resignation! Are you requesting my resignation? I demand an explanation!"

"Did you send for that woman to come to your apartment last evening?"

"I did."

"And she spent the night there?"

"She did."

"While in your apartment you paid her a certain sum of money—fifty dollars to be exact?"

"I did."

"Your wife, and the other members of your family are out of the city?"

"They are."

"That is all, I believe."

"Oh, that is all, is it? Well, let me tell you, Mr. Mayor, that is not all! I demand to be heard."

The executive nodded, and the commissioner turned with blazing eyes upon Clieve. "What is the meaning of this? Where is the leak? Speak out, confound you! Tell them why I sent for that girl."

The detective smiled brazenly into his face. "I guess it's pretty evident why you sent for her, ain't it?"

"Tell them what you told me about that scoundrel levying graft upon her!" The commissioner pointed a finger shaking with rage at the captain. "And tell them why that money was turned over to her. And why it was marked."

"What are you trying to do, make me the goat? I never saw that woman till you sent me to her flat. And, as for graft, as far as I know, the word never passed between us. When I found out what kind of guy you was, I made up my mind to show you up—me and Holden, both. We figured money would pass from you to her, so we marked them bills. It's a cheap bluff you're trying to pull, Mr. Commissioner—but one that's so flimsy it wouldn't fool even a blind man. If you want to go any further, though, there's your man, Grimes. He can tell about the carryings on in the library."

The commissioner was very white—and very calm. He turned to the girl.

"And you?" he asked. "Will you speak out here and now, and tell these men why I paid you that money? Will you tell them that I ordered Clieve and Holden to mark it for the purpose of trapping that scoundrel? And will you repeat here before his honor, the mayor, the story of rottenness and graft that you told me last night? Will you tell how you have paid for the privilege of committing crime in the very heart of the city? Oh, are you just another tool of these damnable plotters?"

A long moment of silence followed the

commissioner's words, during which the girl did not raise her face from her hands.

"Come, speak out, can't you?" The voice of the captain of police rasped harsh, and the girl shuddered.

"I—never paid nothing—to no one for—anything," she faltered. "I told you it was risky for me to go to your rooms—"

"That will do." The voice of the mayor was cold. "I think, William, that, under the circumstances, if I were you, I should lay my resignation on that desk. Of course, you can stand on your rights and demand a public hearing, or carry your case into the courts, but there is your family to think of. This way, you avoid publicity. No one will know why you resigned. My explanation will be simply that we were not in accord on certain points connected with the administration of the department."

The commissioner's eyes flashed. He would fight—would force them to prove their trumped-up charges! Would air before the world the rotten system—the system that had victimized him, and duped the mayor of the city. With an expression of infinite contempt his glance traveled from face to face—the complaisant captain, the brazen Clieve and Holden, the shrinking figure of the girl, the mayor, upon whose countenance was blended sorrow, anger, and bitter disappointment.

Suddenly his face went gray—these were the witnesses against him! There was even Grimes, his servant. What weight would his unsubstantiated work carry before any investigating committee—before a jury, against the testimony of these, borne out, as it would be by the facts he himself must admit? His wife and his daughter—they would believe in his innocence—would know that despite these filthy accusations, he was clean in mind and body. And his friends? He glanced once more into the face of the mayor. Well, some friends, perhaps—the majority of them, business associates—neighbors—would accept as a matter of course the verdict.

Once again his thoughts turned to his wife and his daughter—the believing ones—the loyal. Theirs would be the harder lot, for they must brave the women—the good women, and the

average, that made up their little world of acquaintance—the open snubbing, the studied coolness, the purring sympathy that sheathed the venom-tipped claws of the little-souled among them, the me-and-thou scorn of the righteous—his glance strayed to the desk. Conspicuous upon its broad expanse of flat top was a heavy iron inkstand, a pen, and a dozen sheets of police letterheads.

He picked up the pen, tested its point upon the nail of his thumb, drew the paper toward him, dipped the pen, and began slowly to write. At the end of five minutes he arose, and, with bowed head, silently left the room. In the chair the girl sobbed dryly. Clieve and Holden passed out by another door. Grimes followed them, and the captain turned to the girl. "Beat it!" he said gruffly, and when she had gone, he glanced toward the mayor, who stood staring out the window.

"Excuse me, your honor, I don't want to butt in with any suggestions of my own. If I seem impertinent, tell me so. What I'm saying is said only to help you, and to give the city the benefit of greater efficiency in the department. Bankers run the banks—railroad men run the railroads—why not have a policeman run the police department?"

The mayor paced the room in silence. Suddenly he turned to the officer. "Who is this man?"

"Lieutenant Regan, sir."

"Send for him."

"He should be here now." He called the outer office. "Hello, Coulter, is Lieutenant Regan there? Just came in? Send him here at once." As the lieutenant entered the captain left the room. An hour later he reentered. The new commissioner of police sat in the captain's desk, smoking one of the captain's cigars. He was alone. The captain offered his hand, and as he took it, the ex-lieutenant grinned.

"System, cap—you can't beat system. And, by the way, that Spanish Mary—she knows too much."

"You mean—"

The lieutenant jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Up the river—and see that she gets about ten."