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XXX
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Masters Of The Parachute Mail

By Peter Benedict

"It's circumstantial, certainly, and remarkably clear, and concocted if it is concocted, in a dazzlingly short time. But I've known better performances even than this, and from more unpromising looking subjects, so don't think it's impossible she was making it all up."

He checked episodes upon his fingers. "First there's the early morning incident. Entirely unsupported by any other evidence of any kind at all. Now you and I know that three of our men spent the early hours of the morning scouring the moor for a grey car, and that they actually did stop at this house and ask the girl about it. Why, if her knowledge of the car was entirely innocent, didn't she give herself away then?"

"Because of a fairly competent argument this fellow in the shed happened to be using—an automatic, I gather."

"I didn't mean give herself away in that way. But it is credible that any girl of twenty should remain so absolutely calm that a sergeant of average intelligence, standing within a yard of her, should fail to see anything wrong? Wouldn't he notice that she looked frightened?"

"I haven't noticed her looking frightened yet," said Peter. "I don't think you allow enough latitude for a girl who doesn't frighten at all easily. But in any case, the parents will confirm the part about this mysterious girl who claimed to be staying on the moor. And there are other good points in plenty. Throughout, she's behaved in such a way as to convince me that she's telling the simple truth."

"I grant you she has as good a defence as she'll need," admitted the superintendent. "But it will almost certainly go for trial. No magistrate would have the pluck to do anything but pass the buck to a jury and to us." He looked up quizzically. "Peter, my son, aren't you being just a little more susceptible than is your wont? Haven't the prisoner's looks had a certain amount of effect?"

"We Can Use Her!"

"I shouldn't wonder," said Peter faintly. "But that's not what's worrying me. What I'm thinking of is—do you realize what she could be worth to me, if she is telling the truth?" He added austerely: "I speak from your point of view. As for me, I allow for the genius of instinct in my detections, and instinct says to me: 'Peter, this girl is a winner.' But take it there's an even chance she's innocent, and her story true. Why, it's worth risking the loss of what would, anyhow, be only a pathetic minor capture. Think what she has that we haven't! She has seen, has actually seen two of the gang. She has given two of the most accurately detailed and recognizable sketches I've ever heard put together by professional or amateur, and we have the use of them in any case. But how much better to have the girl herself on the spot. The one person they think they've crippled. The one person they know they've crippled. Invisible, so to speak, and herself as alert as the deuce. Boy, she might be worth the whole gang!"

He sprang suddenly out of his chair, and was on his way to the door when Superintendent Barker shouted: "Eh, where are you going?"

"To the chief constable, to arrange how we're going to get out a beautiful picture out of its golden frame-up. I want that girl. I want her with a different face, different hair, different dress, and the same sharp eyes and won't-be-done spirit—bless 'em!"

"I'll come with you," said the superintendent. "If you're going to do anything silly, I'd better be there to tone it down. But I warn you, you'll get no help from me."

"I shall need none. I feel the mood of eloquence coming on me this moment. Colonel Morgan-Sykes won't stand where judges and juries have fallen. Especially when I offer him in exchange for the possible loss of a minor capture the—almost probable rake-in of the most expertly-covered dope-racket in England. Come on!"

Together in person, but apart in mind, they set out to interview the chief constable.

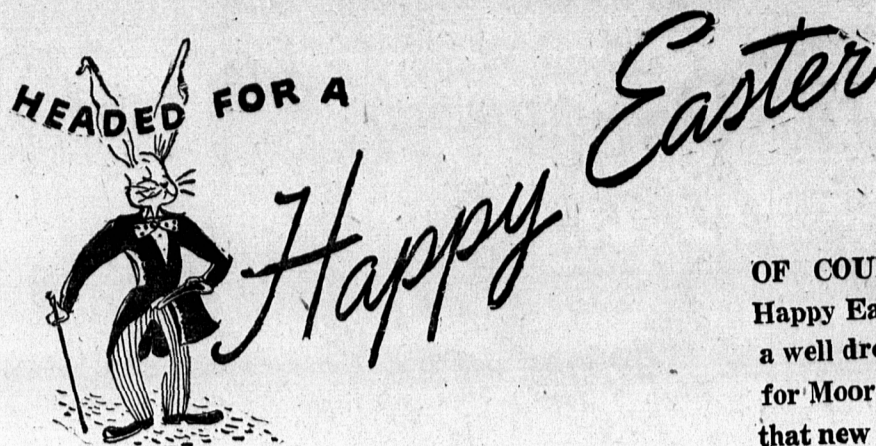
(To be continued)

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