



**I**N ORDINARY detective agency circles Miss Bernice Asterley would have been known as a female operative. She would have followed wives, when she was not luring husbands, and would have earned an easy fifteen dollars a day for her agency; yes, she would have been superb in divorce cases. But Aurelius Smith had never handled a divorce case. Of such cases he had once said that he would prefer to shoot a sitting partridge. Consequently Bernice had walked in cleaner paths of crime. She had snared a number of clever thieves and had been the undoing of one murderer while in the service of her employer. More often she was his stenographer and sometimes made his tea when Langa Doonh, the tall "boy" from India, was not managing the coffee percolator.

Snow and sleet were beating upon the windows of Smith's place on Fenton Street and Langa Doonh had just turned on the light in the great living room when Bernice entered hurriedly from the street and dropped her umbrella in the hall before rushing into the room. For a moment she did not see Smith who was standing by the window curtains gazing out into the little thoroughfare which ran into Fifth Avenue close to

Washington Square.

"It's tonight!" she gasped as he moved away from the curtains.

"I thought so by the way you came up the street," he said. "Your train leaves the Grand Central Station in one hour and your tickets, together with a letter of credit, are on your desk."

"Where—where am I going?" asked the girl in amazement.

"Los Angeles."

"Why?"

"Because they know I am working on this case"—Smith was talking very quietly—"and, tomorrow, you would almost surely be dead—if I fail tonight."

"But—but you, yourself!" ejaculated the girl in a startled voice.

"I may not fail," returned Smith in the same voice. "When in Chicago call at the Blackstone Hotel for a telegram."

Langa Doonh, barefooted and in native costume, hovered around his master with almost maternal care after the departure of Bernice. There had been a moment when the girl had shown a hint of rebellion which Smith had quelled by ignoring it. The native servant felt added responsibility after

the departure of Bernice. His respect and admiration for the "sahib" was unbounded, had been unbounded since the old days in India, but that did not prevent him from caring for his master, sometimes, as he would have tended a small child. Food was always well to the front in his mind, and he immediately started the percolator and produced toasted cheese on crackers.

"Coffee, Langa Doonh, but nothing to eat," said Smith. "I shall eat no dinner tonight."

"Sahib!" pleaded the servant.

"You will take your great knife and remain awake all night," said Smith. "Until I return you will not go to sleep. During the night you will not answer the door bell. If anybody breaks in you will kill him first and telephone the police afterwards."

"Han, sahib!" answered the native with more interest than surprise in his eyes.

As he spoke the door bell sounded and Smith, waving his servant aside, went himself to answer it. He returned at once with two men, important and influential men—even in New York. One of them carried the air of big business about him, or it might have been of philanthropic affairs upon a huge scale. The other man was unmistakably of the police and high up in that mighty New York organization. Smith, himself, contrasted strangely in the presence of his two visitors. Almost lazy in movement and with a face that was utterly impassive he seemed to equal the evident power of his visitors by means of the potential reserve of a deep student.

"Mr. Smith," began the man of business or philanthropy, "you predict that another crisis will occur tonight. I wish you to act in conjunction with the police so that we will be more certain of success."

"When you engaged me six months ago," remarked Smith a trifle indifferently, "you promised that I should have a free hand. Do you intend to break that promise?"

"I have changed my mind," was the terse reply.

"As you like, Mr. Hilsden," returned Smith quietly. "I shall continue the case without pay in the interest of the people of New York."

"Do you object to the police?" questioned the other visitor abruptly.

"Only because this case requires the greatest secrecy, Captain Johnson," answered Smith, "and, in your large body of men, it is difficult to stop all the leaks."

As he finished speaking Smith opened a

drawer of his table and took out a large and bulky envelope which he proceeded to address. For a moment he held it in his hand and looked at the police official.

"I have an intuition," he said, "that I shall not live through tonight. This envelope is addressed to you, Captain Johnson, and I shall leave it in this drawer. Call for it tomorrow if I peg out tonight. It contains all that I know of the case including the name of the man who finances the illicit drug trade of New York."

"If you know that man the job is done," remarked the police official emphatically.

Smith slowly shook his head and turned to Mr. Hilsden. He seemed about to speak but remained silent.

"Who is this man?" asked Mr. Hilsden.

"I shall not name him," returned Smith, "because nobody would believe me."

"Can you not prove it?" questioned Mr. Hilsden.

"It would be easier to kill him than to do that," answered Smith.

"I am afraid you have run into some 'underground' newspaper yarn," broke in Captain Johnson. "Give us your facts and forget the rumors. Either we work together or we do not. I suppose that you know that the police are always fighting the illicit drug trade of the city, and that we know a great deal about it?"

"You know," returned Smith, "that one man finances the whole thing and that payments are made to him, through an agent, in Europe. You may even know who that agent is, but, so intricate is finance, that you are unable to follow the huge profits which finally reach the 'man higher up' in New York."

"You may also know that New York is mapped into seven districts for the sale of these soul crushing drugs. Each district is in charge of one man who employs numerous peddlers. You may be surprised to learn that not one of these seven men has ever met the great criminal financier and yet he holds them in bonds which are stronger than steel."

"How does he do that?" interrupted Captain Johnson.

"By means of a second and last agent," said Smith, quietly locking the drawer in which he had placed the envelope. "This second man is so clever that I am fairly certain the police have not even suspected his existence. It took my assistant—one of the cleverest women in New York—six months

to discover this man and to gain a certain degree of his confidence. It was only by performing a fake robbery upon a great Fifth Avenue store that she was finally able to gain some of his confidence. Even so he would never give out the slightest hint regarding the identity of his employer—an employer who holds his servants in a death grip."

"Just what do you mean by a death grip?" asked Mr. Hilsden.

"Exactly what the words infer," returned Smith. "Both agents and the seven district men are murderers and their mysterious chief holds their written confessions. To disobey him means the electric chair. When one of the district men dies, or is jailed by the police, the remaining six select a new man with the murder qualification and the New York agent meets them by appointment for the purpose of obtaining the new confession which is even witnessed by a notary public. Tonight a new district man is to be 'initiated.'"

"Just where and when will this take place?" asked Mr. Hilsden.

"At midnight in Brooklyn," remarked Smith. "My assistant, Miss Asterley got the information by tapping the telephone wire which runs into the apartment of Felix Martyn, the New York agent."

"And the 'man higher up,' will he be at the rendezvous?" asked Captain Johnson.

"Certainly not," returned Smith. "He leaves all such details to Martyn and would not even know where the meeting is to take place."

"Then we will raid them," remarked Captain Johnson dryly.

"Certainly," agreed Smith, "but there is a detail which makes it difficult. At these meetings the whole seven confessions are made afresh upon a large sheet of paper so that they can be cut apart if required for use. While your raiding party was breaking in the paper would be destroyed and there would be no evidence."

"Then what do you propose?" asked Captain Johnson.

"Simply this," replied Smith. "Martyn arrives first and wears a mask. He admits the seven men into the room after receiving a password. The document is signed and a notary public is called in to witness the signatures which are placed at the side of the paper opposite the confessions. If you will give me two of your best plain clothes men, Captain Johnson, we will pick up Martyn and one of your men will arrest him half way to the rendezvous. I will take the paper of confessions from him and attend the meeting in his place. Half

an hour after I enter the building your second man will have a cordon stretched around the entire block. The rest must be left to such wit as I may possess."

The police official looked gravely at the tall man, sprawled indolently in his chair, and shook his head in disapproval.

"You couldn't do it," he said finally. "I know the kind of men you would be up against. The paper, even if signed, would be destroyed and you would be killed."

"Maybe," returned Smith indifferently, "but I might be able to throw the paper out of the window." He pushed the telephone across the table. "I have stated my only terms. Warn Headquarters that you will need some reserves in Brooklyn at midnight and call the two plain clothes men over here at once."

"And what about the big man who finances the thing?" asked Captain Johnson, hesitating with the telephone in his hand.

"His name is in here," said Smith. "If I fail you can go after him tomorrow. If I succeed you won't need to."

"Why won't I need to?" asked Captain Johnson. "Do you mean that you will get him tonight?"

"That is my secret," answered Smith. "I have talked enough."

"Spring three one hundred," said Captain Johnson, lifting the receiver from the hook.

While the officer was telephoning Mr. Hilsden, who had been unusually quiet, asked a question.

"How did you discover the identity of this criminal financier?" he asked.

"I heard his voice over the telephone," replied Smith.

"You mean that you recognized it?"

"Yes."

"Good God!" exclaimed Mr. Hilsden, pulling at his short gray moustache and straightening his rather heavy body. "Is he a public man?"

"Nearly everybody in the city knows him by reputation," was the slow reply.

Aurelius Smith seemed in no hurry for his guests to depart. Indeed he asked Captain Johnson to remain until the plain clothes men arrived. Once the telephone bell sounded, but from Smith's conversation it was impossible to know what had been said at the other end of the wire. Just before the detectives from Headquarters arrived he spoke in Hindustani to his servant. As a result Langa

Doonh brought in a particularly long and heavy overcoat at the same time that the plain clothes men entered the room. Lazily Smith rose and slipped his long arms into the coat.

"You are going out now?" asked Mr. Hilsden in some surprise.

"Yes," replied Smith, "if Captain Johnson will order these two men to take their directions from me."

Captain Johnson shrugged his shoulders and nodded assent.

## CHAPTER II

OUTSIDE the sleet and snow whirled uncomfortably. A huge police car lurched away through the gloom with Mr. Hilsden and Captain Johnson while Smith and his two companions stood upon the curb. For several minutes the tall man in the bulky overcoat turned his back to the wind and talked short pithy sentences to his companions.

"But I thought the raid was to be pulled off in Brooklyn," said one of the detectives.

"I hope everybody else thinks so too," answered Smith, "but we won't see Brooklyn tonight."

The three men, with Smith somewhat in the lead, moved off toward Fifth Avenue and turned south in the direction of Washington Square. On the south side of the square a small boy seemed to spring out of nowhere and rushed up to Smith.

"Got him, Jimmie?" asked Smith.

"De thoid door down," answered the boy. "He's just startin' dinner."

"Do you mean to say that you trust such things to a kid like that?" asked one of the Headquarters detectives as the three men moved in to the shelter of a wall from where the door of the restaurant could be viewed.

"Uh-huh," said Smith. "He's as sharp as a fox terrier and as faithful."

As a precaution Smith engaged a passing taxi and ordered it to wait at a few yards' distance. Jimmie, the boy, seemed to have disappeared as astonishingly as he had appeared. Three-quarters of an hour passed before anything happened. Then a taxi drew up before the door of the restaurant and shortly a tall man descended the steps and entered it. Almost before the taxi began to move Jimmie appeared again out of the semi-darkness.

"Christopher Street subway station," he said to Smith in passing.

Immediately Smith and his companions moved out to their own taxi and entered it. The taxi from the restaurant was about a quarter of a block in advance as Smith ordered his driver to drive to the Christopher Street subway.

"That was Felix Martyn who came out of the restaurant," said Smith as the taxi started. "I thought he would take the subway on a night like this."

"Martyn did not appear to be at all suspicious at the subway station and his three followers entered the car in rear of the one which he selected. Smith stood in the vestibule, from where he could glimpse the interior of the car in front.

At 14th Street Martyn stepped out upon the platform and took the first uptown express. Again Smith and his companions took the car in rear.

"Luck is with us," commented Smith. "This is a Bronx train and he will have to change at 96th Street. You"—turning to one of his companions—"will make the arrest on the platform at 96th Street. We will take him in a taxi to the 100th Street Police Station and I will search him en route."

At the 96th Street station Martyn stepped from the train but halted for a moment before the mirror of a gum slot machine. Over his shoulder Smith glimpsed the action and sensed that something was wrong. Swiftly he stepped through one of the revolving "featherweight" gates and halted on the other side as if to fix a shoe lace. One of the Headquarters men also passed through the gates and halted, half way up the steps, in the act of lighting a cigarette. The remaining detective was bearing slowly down upon Martyn through a sprinkling of passengers who were waiting for the next train.

Suddenly Martyn turned and faced the oncoming detective. In his hand was something black. There was a flash and a roar. People screamed and rushed frantically to either end of the platform. As they did so the detective halted, staggered and fell in a heap upon the cement floor.

The next minute Martyn bounded, gun in hand, toward the exit heading straight for the gate beside which Smith was standing after straightening up from attending to his shoe. Only a man with the very quickest of wits could have, acted as Smith did. Partly drawing back, as if in alarm, he reached out a long, arm and dropped a nickel in the slot thereby locking the gate against an outward turn. Even if Martyn saw the action he

had no time to safeguard against it. An instant later he crashed into the gate, which caught him in the stomach, with the result that he collapsed over it in a doubled up position.

With a heavy blow Smith struck the bent man on the back of the neck before dragging him completely over the gate and driving his knee into the pit of his stomach to make sure of the job. The senseless man, whose pistol had clattered to the floor, was swiftly carried to the stairs and up to Broadway by both Smith and the remaining detective from Headquarters. A few people stared with open mouths, but it was done very quickly and Broadway people are accustomed to nearly anything.

"Drunk," said Smith to a taxi man by the curb, and they bundled their captive into the cab and were off before the alarm in the subway had reached the street.

Half way to the 100th Street Police Station Smith had completely searched the clothing of Martyn, who was still quite senseless. In a pocket inside his vest he found a large envelope containing the document which he desired. There was also a black mask sufficiently large to fit well down over the face. After some quick explaining and telephoning at the police station Smith and his one companion drove away to commence the more serious work of the evening. Already one man had fallen and the work had only started.

Smith dismissed the taxi at 107th Street and walked west toward the river. With his high collar turned up against the weather and his felt hat pulled well down there was little of his face visible. As a matter of fact he was about the same height as Martyn and might have passed for him in the darkness. At Broadway he paused.

"Watch the door at which I turn in," he said. "Half an hour after I enter have the whole block circled by a cordon of police. I shall be in apartment ninety-six on the top floor. If you hear any pistol shot or disturbance raid the apartment at once."

Instantly the plain clothes man fell back and Smith went on alone. He turned in to the apartment house without hesitation and stamped the snow from his feet with easy freedom as he advanced to the elevator. A sleepy West Indian boy carried him to the eighth floor without question or comment. As the elevator descended he mounted the stairs to the ninth floor. One thing had been worrying him. He knew the word which he was to require from each of the seven district men before admitting

them to the inner room, but he did not know who would be in the apartment when he arrived. In addition he had no key to the apartment. It was his profession to meet uncertainties and to act without hesitation. He did so now and found the door of apartment ninety-six not only unlocked but open. It was the only open door upon the top hall.

### CHAPTER III

THE apartment in which Smith found himself—for he entered at once—was of the two-room, and small kitchen variety. It had just been decorated and was not yet furnished. A swift walk through the three rooms revealed the fact that it contained no earlier arrivals. Smith made sure of that by throwing open the closet doors. He felt the electric light bulbs, which were burning in all three rooms, and found them at maximum heat, showing that they had been turned on for some little time. A kitchen table, bearing a pen and a bottle of ink, attracted his attention in the inner room. It was the only article of furniture.

His watch informed Smith that it lacked just fifteen minutes to the time for which Martyn had called the interview. He returned to the tiny hall leading from the front door to the combination dining room and living room. Two doors opened off this room, one into what must have been intended for a bedroom—the inner room. Amid the silence of the bare apartment Smith turned swiftly on his heel and closed the front door which latched itself by means of the usual spring lock.

It may be that Smith heard something without realizing it, but as he turned back from the door he felt that he was not alone. In the bright glare of the empty apartment the sensation of another presence seemed absurd, and yet Smith did not neglect the feeling. Too often his life had hung upon little things which seemed absurd and of little importance. Quickly he adjusted the mask over his face. With his hat slouched down and his high collar, still snow laden, turned up there was little or nothing of his face to be seen. He was merely a tall and slow moving man dressed in a long and heavy overcoat.

Waiting for circumstances, great or small, to give him his cue for action, Smith walked slowly into the dining room. Half way across that room his quick eye caught the position of the door leading into the inner room. It was at least half a

foot farther open than it had been and yet nobody had entered the front door—Smith was sure of that—and the apartment was on the ninth floor with the only fire-escape window securely fastened.

A man with his back to the farther wall was facing the door as Smith entered the bedroom. He was without hat or overcoat and it was evident that he had not recently been out in the snow storm. Smith, although he did not know him, sized him up as a corrupt politician, a swinger of votes in an unsavory part of the city.

"Are you satisfied with things?" asked the man as Smith came into the room.

"Yes," he said over his shoulder before turning and leaning against the wall beside the window which he had just opened wide.

"Have a heart!" exclaimed the man. "I ain't got a coat."

"Then hurry up!" directed Smith, imitating the voice of the man he was impersonating—a voice which he had heard upon several occasions during the past six months.

"Say, are you sore on me?" demanded the man. "Have I done anything the chief doesn't like? As sure as my name's Grogan I ain't done a thing."

"Then we will go ahead with our business, Grogan," replied Smith, picking up the name.

The man named Grogan swiftly left the room and returned almost at once, closing the bedroom door behind him. He looked at Smith and seemed about to speak, but changed his mind and walked as far as possible from the open window beside which Smith still stood enveloped in his heavy coat. There was a pause and, more quickly than Smith expected, a knock sounded at the door.

"That will be the new man that I'm introducing," said Grogan.

"Let him in," said Smith, and Grogan did not move.

Grogan started slightly.

"You're acting funny tonight," he said. "Do you want me to take the word?"

"Yes," from Smith.

Grogan was half way across the room when he suddenly wheeled upon Smith with one hand at his hip pocket.

"What is the word?" he demanded.

Smith neither moved nor spoke at once, but stared through the holes in his mask.

Grogan took a step or two toward the window, crouching slightly like an animal about to spring.

"Bozlum," said Smith in his same even tones.

"Hell!" exclaimed Grogan turning again to the door. "You've got me jumpy tonight."

It was well that Smith forced Grogan to answer the knock on the door. The single knock of the man outside demanded a different knock in answer from within—an answer which Smith did not know. He had guessed the possibility just in time.

Grogan gave two rapid knocks and two slow ones. The door was slightly opened and a word was whispered. Immediately there entered a man who, notwithstanding his upright posture, was instantly recognized by Smith as one of those fake cripples who pretend to sell pencils to the softhearted on Broadway. Smith recognized him but, unfortunately, he did not know his name, although he knew it must be one of the seven names upon the document which he carried.

"You've got to sign before you see the other names," said Grogan motioning the street faker to the table and looking expectantly at Smith.

As Smith took the document of confessions from his pocket the newcomer produced a heavy gold-banded fountain pen. Smith guessed that he was expected to present the paper for signature in such a way that only the one confession would be exposed, but—he did not know which one! It was one more moment of danger which might bring exposure and death. His eye fell on the expensive gold pen and he slapped the paper on the table with the blank back up.

"Sign here!" he commanded.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Grogan.

"Sign!" ordered Smith again.

The man signed slowly and hesitatingly while Grogan, evidently puzzled, fidgeted nervously.

"Now," said Smith, noting the name and turning and folding the paper, "sign here."

As Smith spoke he knocked the gold pen from the man's hand and swept the bottle of ink to the floor.

"This is the place, Karnsky," he added, and presented his own fountain pen for use in signing. "I need scarcely inform you that your life depends upon the quality of ink which you had in your own fountain pen."

"Afraid of fading ink, eh?" commented Grogan. "Damn it, I didn't get you at first."

Five more men were admitted, all without hats and overcoats and their signatures were taken openly upon the table. Slowly Smith refolded the document after the last signature was dry and replaced it in his pocket. For a moment he stood by

the window silently looking at the seven men. It seemed impossible that such an undertaking could have been accomplished without disaster. But the thing was not finished.

Grogan produced a flask and approached the window.

"You will take the first swig for our usual toast?" he asked, looking up at the tall, masked figure.

Smith, knowing no toast, pushed up the mask sufficiently to touch the mouth of the flask to his lips.

"Success," he said. Grogan started back.

"Let me see the little finger of your left hand," he demanded hoarsely.

Smith knew that Martyn, the man he was impersonating, had lost the little finger of his left hand and for that reason he had not removed his left glove since entering the room. He did not move.

"Boys!" called Grogan. "There's something wrong. Stand by that door."

A gun had seemed to materialize in Grogan's hand and he was approaching Smith cautiously but menacingly.

"Fool!" exclaimed Smith. "I'll show you my hand. Remember that the chief has your old signatures and keeps them till he gets the new ones. Six of you will die if you disobey me."

As Smith spoke he lifted his left hand and commenced to withdraw the glove. Grogan lowered his gun and the next second Smith's right hand jerked an automatic from his left sleeve. He dropped to one knee and the pistol circled and darted over his seven opponents like the head of a snake. Three other men, with guns half drawn, halted, like Grogan, transfixed.

"Leave the room as you came," commanded Smith.

"Sorry," replied Grogan, "but I'd just as soon die here as in the electric chair. Give me that paper or I'll shoot."

"The place is surrounded," returned Smith. "The first shot will bring a hundred men. You can't escape."

"Help can't reach you in time," snapped Grogan. "In two minutes, if you don't give up that paper, you will be dead and the paper will be destroyed."

"If I have to give my life for it," returned Smith in a low voice, the harm you have done New York will never be repeated."

Suddenly Smith shot up to his full height and

the action of both of his hands seemed instantaneous. A white paper, jerked by his left hand, fluttered from his pocket and out of the window. At the same time his right hand turned the snake-like pistol straight against his own breast. There was a loud report and Smith staggered, swayed and fell to the floor.

"My God!" exclaimed Grogan, rushing to the window and peering out in search of the fluttering paper.

Six men rushed for the door and Grogan, after a look at Smith lying maskless upon the floor, followed swiftly. Perhaps four minutes passed before several policemen, headed by Captain Johnson, burst into the room.

"Too bad! Too bad!" muttered Johnson, bending over Smith.

To his utter astonishment the man on the floor opened his eyes, and struggled weakly into a sitting position.

"What's too bad," he grumblingly asked. "Oh, yes, I know now. Guess I knocked myself out for a few minutes. I wore two bullet-proof vests and fired a shot into myself so that my companions wouldn't think it necessary to kill me. The bullet must have hit me like the kick of a mule. Wait a minute."

Smith felt in his pocket and drew out a paper.

"Here are the signed confessions, Johnson," he continued.

Captain Johnson was so astonished that words failed him at first.

"Where are these seven criminals?" he finally asked.

"In the apartment below," said Smith. "I heard some of them climbing up the dumb-waiter shaft and I guess they went the same way."

Smith did not wait to see the final roundup but drove slowly home with Captain Johnson. A bullet at close range, when prevented from penetrating, gives a very severe blow, which may have had something to do with Smith's lack of desire for more action that night. On the other hand he seemed to wish Captain Johnson to come home with him.

## CHAPTER IV

**I**N FENTON STREET, at Smith's door, Captain Johnson found more of his men.

"Mr. Hilsden has been murdered," explained

an officer. He was evidently coming to call on Mr. Smith. The native servant heard a cry and found him dying on the front steps."

Rapidly Smith talked to Langa Doonh in Hindustani and then drew Captain Johnson into his work room where they had sat that afternoon.

"I have always believed," he said, "that the great drug financier of New York would keep close to the police in order to throw suspicion off himself and, at the same time, to keep himself informed regarding what was being done to catch him. You will remember that I addressed an envelope to you—an envelope containing the name of this man."

Smith pointed to the drawer which had been forced open and some of the contents spilled.

"It is just possible," he continued, taking Captain Johnson back to the hall where lay the body of Mr. Hilsden, "that this envelope—" gently

thrusting a hand into the breast pocket of the dead man and removing the envelope—"may be addressed to you."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Captain Johnson. "Mr. Hilsden!"

"Yes," said Smith. "My servant admitted him and caught him in the act of stealing the envelope. He chased him out of the house and would have killed him had not Hilsden slipped on the icy steps and broken his neck."

"So it wasn't murder," commented Captain Johnson.

Later that evening Langa Doonh apologized for not killing Mr. Hilsden and asked forgiveness.

"Uh-huh," said Smith, "and telegraph Miss Asterley at the Blackstone Hotel, to come home again."