

Senga of the Club Hibou

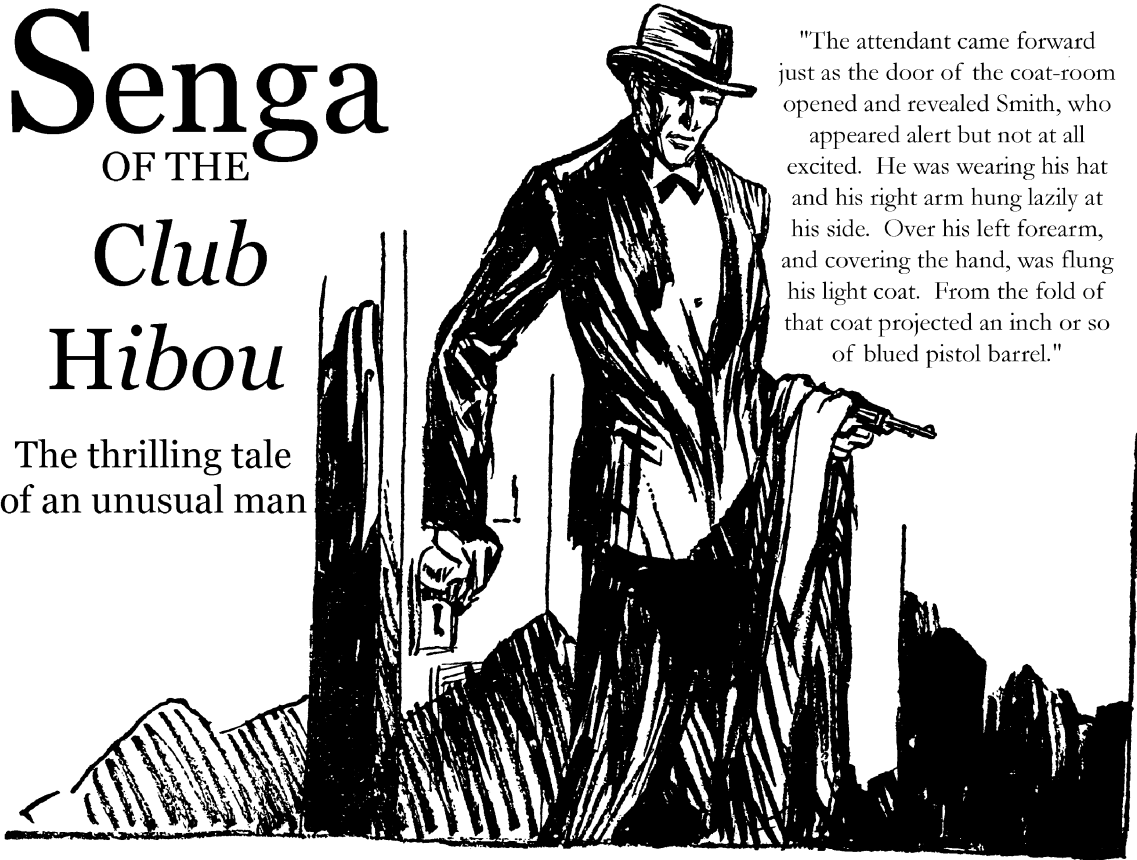
By
R. T. M. SCOTT

*Originally printed in
Real Detective Tales
April-May, 1929*

A Midnight Adventure of Aurelius

Senga OF THE Club Hibou

The thrilling tale
of an unusual man



"The attendant came forward just as the door of the coat-room opened and revealed Smith, who appeared alert but not at all excited. He was wearing his hat and his right arm hung lazily at his side. Over his left forearm, and covering the hand, was flung his light coat. From the fold of that coat projected an inch or so of blued pistol barrel."

Seeking Bummer Gortz, Detective Smith goes to the Club Hibou at midnight -- and deliberately enters the web of a murder plot. But the quick-witted detective is able to think two jumps ahead of his enemies.

"I AM neither a professional murderer nor a legal executioner," remarked Aurelius Smith quietly, as he lighted his black brier and looked at his client through the first puffs of smoke.

"Bummer Gortz killed my cashier and escaped in broad daylight before a hundred witnesses," returned old Ben Bradflint coldly. "The police have combed New York for him and failed. I want him killed."

"Killing is bungling and ignorant," retorted Smith dryly, scrutinizing his pipe and nursing some dark shreds into the bowl.

"Do you, a detective, disbelieve in the death penalty for murder?" demanded old Bradflint in amazement.

"Only a stupid man believes in anything that nobody understands," remarked the detective without emphasis.

"What d'you mean?" asked Bradflint angrily.

"Death," said Smith. "Do you understand it?"

Bradflint shrugged his shoulders disdainfully and reached for his hat.

"The electric chair," continued Smith, "is stupid, but not nearly so stupid as the practice of allowing habitual criminals to have their liberty on bail, on parole, and on legal technicalities. Gortz is a menace to society and I shall try to send him to the chair for you. If I blunder, and am forced to kill him myself, I shall charge you nothing."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Bradflint. "I was beginning to think you were a sentimentalist."

"Sometimes I am," drawled Smith. "Sentiment is a powerful stimulant."

For a few minutes Bradflint described the murder of his cashier and the escape of the murderer before a crowd of terrorized spectators. So completely had Gortz hidden himself that there seemed to be no clue to his hiding place.

"Of course," said Smith, when Bradflint paused, "Bummer Gortz has quite a record. He was arrested three times for burglary and twice for

Smith, Super-detective

"The room was a great oval with a dancing floor in the center....

Loud voices and harsh jazz music resounded....

The hot air reeked of a hundred perfumes and cosmetics."



*A brilliant story of
New York gangsters
and
night-club
life*

by
R. T. M.
SCOTT

Illustrated by Paul Parker

carrying concealed weapons. He has spent about seven years in jail, with intervals of a few months out on parole. His last arrest was in the Club Hibou, just before the Baumes Law came in, when he was caught with a gun on his hip. He is still out on bail for that offense."

"I didn't tell you any of this," interrupted Bradflint. "You seem to know a lot about him."

"My profession," explained Smith, "requires me to know criminals in the same way that a bookmaker knows horses."

"But a man like that should never have been allowed out on bail!" exclaimed Bradflint indignantly. "This pampering of criminals is soft-hearted foolishness."

"Soft-headed foolishness," corrected Smith dryly. He paused and reached for the telephone. "I am going to have a word with the celebrated night-club hostess of the Club Hibou. Heard of that place?"

"Been there once," grunted Bradflint. "Damn'

bad place, but very fashionable."

"Know a girl called Senga at the Club Hibou?" asked Smith, turning away from the telephone.

"No," answered Bradflint. "Just went there once, sight-seeing."

"Sight-seeing' supports considerable evil in this city," remarked Smith, as he dialed the Club Hibou and asked to speak with Madame Lola.

There was quite a long wait.

"This particular hostess of night revels," said Smith, covering the transmitter with his hand, "is very entertaining and quite easy to look at with drunken eyes. Soberly examined, however, she is an even more damnable type than your man, Gortz. Ah!"

He jerked the telephone quickly to his mouth and spoke with slow, emphatic distinctness.

"Tell your mistress," he said, "that I would speak with her of a ship, a ship that carries different kinds of things—*different*, mark you—

from the West Indies.”

It seemed that Madame Lola had not, herself, come to the telephone and again there was a wait, but this time the wait was not so long.

“This is Aurelius Smith, of 126 Fenton Street, speaking,” came the slow, easy words. “You are the chief owner of a certain ship which brings booze, narcotics and smuggled aliens to the Jersey coast.... No, this is not blackmail. If you wish to go straight to the electric chair, just hang up the telephone before I have finished talking.... Certainly I know what I am talking about. I know that you dump your cargo into the sea when approached by a revenue boat and you dump it *including the aliens*. You are quite aware of these occasional, wholesale murders on your ship.... Save your denials for the jury—if you refuse my request.... My request is very simple. I want Bummer Gortz.... If you don’t know where he is, you can find out. You might tackle Senga, your blonde entertainer—the girl who was with Gortz when he was arrested for carrying a rod.... I don’t care what you do or how you do it. Senga knows where Gortz is hiding if anybody does.... You think I’m bluffing? Ask one of your police friends about me. I’ll drop into the Club Hibou about midnight for your answer.”

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Bradflint in amazement, as Smith abruptly hung up the telephone. “Do you bargain with criminals like that?”

“Sometimes,” replied Smith, relighting his pipe. “There are so many of them—on parole and on bail. However, I was only quoting a little underworld gossip in the form of a bluff. It may work the trick and—it may not.”

“I am surprised,” commented Bradflint, “that you haven’t been bumped off long ago.”

“Uh-huh,” said Smith. “So am I. Maybe I’ll get it tonight.”

IT was after midnight when Aurelius Smith reached the night club which bore the name of Club Hibou. It was crowded as usual at that hour, and more than a dozen men and women in evening clothes were held back by a golden cord while they waited for tables. Smith unconcernedly handed his coat and hat to a Chinese girl and moved lazily toward the barrier. The exceedingly haughty captain, behind the golden cord, saw him and raised an eyebrow very slightly.

“Mr. Smith,” he said, releasing the cord, “your table is waiting, sir.”

“Thanks,” drawled Smith, hesitating for a moment by the impressive captain. “I received your note an hour ago.”

“I sent you no note,” retorted the captain in evident astonishment.

“Oh, nobody heard me,” returned Smith in a slightly lower voice, but not so low that a passing waiter did not hear and turn his head slightly.

The captain stepped back a pace or two and his face showed anger. Smith had attacked at the moment of his entrance. He knew that he was surrounded by enemies and he knew that the first blow, no matter how slight, carries a psychological advantage. To create distrust in their own ranks would be a more damaging blow to his enemies than any physical impact could be.

The room was a great oval with a dancing floor in the center. The curving wall was completely covered by heavy, black curtains decorated with golden owls. Through folds in the curtain waiters flitted with a suddenness that seemed magical. Loud voices and harsh, jazz music resounded.

The jam was so great that it seemed absurd to look for an empty table. But there was one which, had it not been for Smith, the captain would long since have sold to some wealthy patron for a fifty-dollar bill.

Around the small dancing square the tall detective followed a waiter. He stepped on an empty gin bottle, inhaled the hot air which reeked of a hundred perfumes and cosmetics, squeezed between the bare backs of women where tables nearly touched, brushed some of the powder from his clothes, kicked another gin bottle slithering out on the dance floor—and reached his table.

The table was small and close to the heavy curtains. Upon it was a reservation card, marked “Smith,” and two menus. It was evident that he had been expected. Although none of the guests paid any attention to him, Smith’s lazily roving eyes noted the fact that the waiters were frequently glancing at him with more than usual interest.

Smith ordered a bottle of White Rock and smoked. The waiters seemed to lose their interest in him. The patrons of the place paid attention to nobody except for the purpose of making vulgar love or obtaining more to drink. The dancing floor was a struggling mass of jiggling, hopping couples who seemed to move up and down for lack of space on the floor. Many continued to jiggle in befuddled dancing after the band stopped playing. The entertainers were resting and there was no sign

of Madame Lola, the celebrated hostess and owner.

As Smith sat there, silent and apparently bored, a girl came threading her way between tables. She was slender and dressed in vivid green. Her flaring skirts ended well above her knees. A great mass of fair hair gave her distinction amid the bobbed heads of her sisters. On one slender wrist was tied a handkerchief. Her face was startling in that it attracted and shocked at the same moment. It was as if a face by Greuze had been colored by some wayward artist in Greenwich Village. Men and women stared and turned their heads as she passed. Even Smith raised his serious eyes and regarded the highly painted face with frank interest as she approached.

And it was to Smith's table that she came and took the only other chair while he stood lazily, but respectfully, and held it for her while she was seated.

"Never saw a bull do that before," she remarked coolly.

"You are too young to have seen all there is to see," he returned with just a touch of friendliness.

She placed the hand with the handkerchief upon the table, moved a bit restlessly and glanced down to her lap. Instantly Smith held an open cigarette case toward her.

"Is this the kind you want?" he asked.

"How did you know I wanted a cigarette?" she questioned in some surprise while her big, blue eyes examined him.

"Well, Senga," explained Smith quietly, "it is my profession to read character and to divine thoughts."

"Tell me something more if you are so clever," she demanded, interested.

"Not now, Agnes," he replied.

"How the hell did you know that was my name?" she asked angrily.

"How would a girl obtain such a name as Senga except by spelling her name backwards?" asked Smith in return.

"It's funny that nobody here ever discovered the trick," she said pensively, while the anger died from her eyes.

"Nobody here is really interested in you," retorted Smith calmly, "except for what they can get out of you."

"Ah, that's the parrot's cracker," she snapped, but it was plain the thrust had gone home. "Give me a drink."

"I'll see what I can do," Smith answered indifferently.

Scarcely moving his body, he extended a long leg under an adjacent table and with his foot drew out a silver flask from where it lay on the floor. Stooping, he picked it up, unscrewed the top and poured some amber fluid into the single glass which stood beside his bottle of White Rock.

"You are a cool one," remarked the girl, sniffing the drink before tossing it down neat. "I don't drink much, but this is a special occasion."

Without answering, Smith threw the handsome flask back under the table from whence it came. It fell with sufficient crash to make the rather drunken owner look down and pick it up, thinking probably that he had just knocked it off the table with his elbow.

"You are a damned cool one," added the girl with approval in her voice.

"Uh-huh," said Smith. "So are you—and quite brave. Your wrist is paining a lot, but you control your face so that you scarcely show it. Burn or cut? What have you put on it?"

"Burn," she answered, looking at him curiously. "I dabbed it with cold cream. You seem more interested in me than in asking questions."

"Questions about Bummer Gortz?" he queried, as if the matter were of slight importance. "That can wait. Let me see what I can do."

A NEARBY table, which had just been vacated, was covered with a clutter of glasses and salad dishes. By means of a long reach Smith obtained a bottle of oil and placed it upon his own table. Drawing out a fine linen handkerchief, he deliberately tore it into strips and, the next minute, his slender fingers were gently, very gently, untying and removing the crumpled handkerchief from the girl's wrist. So deftly and so gently did he work that she sat quite still and watched him. No doctor could have applied the oil more softly or tied the bandage more expertly.

"Remind you of something?" asked Smith unexpectedly as he finished.

She lifted her eyes from the bandaged wrist with a startled expression and glanced away immediately with what seemed to be bashfulness. It was a strange contrast to her bizarre make-up.

Suddenly she leaned close to him and spoke in a low voice.

"Since I came to New York nobody ever did anything like that for me," she said. "You did it as if you didn't care for anything—but just—to help me."

"I didn't," replied Smith simply.

"I'm going to give you a break," she said quickly, bending her head still closer. "Orders have gone out that you are to be bumped off before you leave tonight."

"Well, what are they waiting for?"

"To make certain that you have no help outside and to hear what you have to say to me," she replied, and sat back in her chair to indicate that her friendly act was over.

Not a flicker of surprise showed upon Smith's long face. Instead, there was a friendly twinkle in his eyes as if he were grateful but too lazy to express his thanks in words.

"That burn on your wrist is V-shaped," he said, as if thinking aloud. "It might have been done with hot curling tongs. Your hair is naturally curly and has not been curled for a long time—if ever. The burn is deliberate not an accidental touch. Who did it?"

She did not answer.

"Madame Lola?" he asked, and watched her eyes. "I see that I am right. She did it to make you tell about Gortz. The next burn would have been on your face, Well, let us forget about Gortz. Why do you stay with such people?"

"You seem to know so much," she said, pouring White Rock into the glass and sipping it, "you ought to know."

"I *do* know!" he answered.

A waiter approached and held out a menu card. Smith took the card, tore it in two and dropped it on the floor.

"These people are not like us," he said to the girl, utterly ignoring the waiter. "They only understand arrogance and brute strength. They are swine."

The waiter walked away, puzzled and impressed.

"I'll say you have nerve," said the girl. "That was a signal for me to hurry. I must go now."

"Afraid?" asked Smith. "Senga might be afraid, but not Agnes."

She hesitated and looked at him, a little bewildered. Some of the White Rock spilled upon the table and she wiped it up absent-mindedly with the handkerchief which Smith had taken from her burned wrist.

Quickly Smith leaned forward and his voice became serious.

"Now I think I understand you," he said. "I am convinced that something, or somebody, wonderfully good stands behind you. One thing I want to know. Why did you never bob your hair?"

She did not answer, but her face was serious and she did not avoid his eyes.

"Has it anything to do with what you thought of when I bandaged your wrist?" he continued, watching her eyes keenly. "Has it anything to do with the early training which made you wipe the table unconsciously just now? You are not a New Yorker. Where is this person who can place a bandage with such loving fingers and who taught you before you came to New York? Is she—west? North? Ah, upstate? There can only be one such person—for you. She loved your hair and you keep it long for occasional visits—home? Which is it to be, Agnes, the Club Hibou and Madame Lola, or—her?"

The girl had dropped her face into her hands and was staring at the table. Her shoulders shook just a trifle. Suddenly she raised her head to look across the big room and her eyes became filled with fear. She touched Smith's arm apprehensively.

"The captain is wearing a white carnation," she said in a voice that he could barely hear. "It is a signal that you have no help outside and they are going to get you."

"Not till the orchestra starts again," remarked Smith. "They will want plenty of noise to cover the report of the gun."

"No," she said, shaking her head nervously. "They will use a silencer and walk you down to a taxi like a drunk and drop you into the river. It—it will come from the curtains behind you."

"Even so," was the calm reply, "they will wait for the music to take advantage of the confusion of people crowding to the dance floor. Have you decided?" he paused. "Isn't she worth it?"

"I'd like to try," she murmured, moving restlessly and becoming more and more nervous. "But I have sunk damn' low. Could I make myself fit for decent people again?"

"A woman is what she is and not what she was," answered Smith with easy assurance.

Suddenly the girl took a deep breath as if coming to a resolution. Both hands were clenched upon the table and her eyes stared without seeing between the beaded lashes.

"I'd like to do it," she spoke her thoughts aloud, "even if Gortz kills me for chucking him. But if I go back to my dressing-room I'm done. I can't get out alone."

Smith lighted a cigarette, glanced indifferently at the people near him and assured her that he would take her out and attend to Gortz

afterwards.

“YOU don’t know what you’re up against,” she insisted. “You’re the luckiest dick on earth if you get out yourself.” She stopped and looked at him. “Detective? You’re the craziest detective I ever met.”

There was no reply. The languid man smoked and looked across the room with no particular interest.

“You certainly aren’t afraid,” the girl continued, staring at him while she clenched and unclenched her hands. “Don’t you know you are just getting ready to die?”

“What of it?” he asked. “I have no one who needs me. It’s better to die now than old and—neglected.”

Her hands remained tightly clenched. There was a softened expression in the gray-blue eyes which she watched and which did not seem to watch her. There was no speech between them for a full half minute, while she stared, apparently fascinated by the eyes and face before her.

“What are you thinking about?” she demanded tremulously, advancing her face close to his as though her words might not reach him.

“I was thinking,” he said softly, while the expression of something seemed to grow in his eyes, “of the touch of my tongue on a frosty gate-latch, of a dog scratching at a kitchen door, of the sound of frogs in spring, of a blue apron and a glass of milk.”

Her hand was over on his knee and she was leaning half out of her chair.

“Do you think you could take me right out of here this minute?” she pleaded, while a tear trembled on one painted cheek. “We’re both from a hick town. Could you just kidnap me?”

“Of course, Agnes,” answered Smith, with a smile that shone and was gone. “Do just what I say and nothing more. I can think two jumps ahead of the people in this place.”

“But Gortz is here!” she suddenly exclaimed. “Madame Lola burned me till I gave her his address. She sent for him to come and kill you.”

There was no time to reply. A waiter appeared and presented a check to Smith. It was for one bottle of White Rock and two cover charges and amounted to twelve dollars. As the waiter handed the check he bent over and whispered something to Senga. On the platform the orchestra were handling instruments in preparation for the next dance.

“Just a minute,” said Smith, and stood between the waiter and the girl. “There is a mistake in the check. I had two bottles of White Rock and you have only charged me for one.”

He handed back the check. Most men, wishing to gain time, would have argued that they were over charged. Smith did the unexpected thing and claimed to be under charged. The waiter, pencil poised, hesitated before jotting down an extra bottle and returning the check.

“Your table is wanted, sir. I must hurry.”

But Smith turned his back, stooped and spoke into the ear of the girl.

“On the first note of music go straight to the edge of the dance floor and wait,” he said.

“I must ask you to hurry, sir,” urged the waiter nervously.

Smith slowly straightened from his stooping position and once more faced the waiter. He took the small tray, bearing the check, in his left hand and, with careless dexterity, used the other hand to pluck the pencil from the waiter. Across the check he wrote “Payment refused” and signed his name. The protest from the waiter was drowned in the first crash of savage, jazz music.

Again the unexpected act slowed the mind of the waiter, and Smith walked unconcernedly to the edge of the dance floor where Senga waited, undoubtedly anxious and nervous. He placed a hand behind her back and they moved off, with the simplest of fox trot steps, straight toward the orchestra which was exerting itself in the loudest and wildest music of the evening.

“We will keep near the music till the floor gets crowded,” Smith said. “This band plays other engagements and has a certain amount of reputation. They do not quite belong here. As murder witnesses they are not so good.”

She was following Smith’s simple steps with professional ease and her nervousness was leaving her. People were crowding out upon the floor, some singing and noisy, others maudlin or stupidly silent.

“You’re smooth,” she said. “You would be a swell dancer if you knew more steps. Your arm is like steel but sort of gentle.”

But Smith was not interested in dancing except as a convenient instrument to achieve his purpose. He told her that the floor was sufficiently crowded and that they would move to the other end near the entrance. She was leaning against him quite freely and once she disengaged her hand to press it against his breast.

"You've got a gat?" she asked. "Shoulder holster? I was wondering where you carried it."

Nor did Smith appear any more interested in guns than he did in dancing, or in the struggling mob through which he moved and did not hesitate to use an elbow or a heel to aid his passage. They had nearly crossed the dance floor when she stiffened in his embrace and he bent his head to catch her excited words.

"There's Gortz!" she said. "He just spoke to the captain and went out into the entrance hall!"

"Pull yourself together," he returned. "They are trying to guess my game."

Aurelius Smith, in conventional dinner coat, and the startling girl, in vivid green, emerged from the dance floor and walked between the tables toward the entrance where the captain stood. That impressive official took a step forward to meet Smith as he approached.

"Our Chinese girl has been called away from the coat-room for a few minutes, Mr. Smith," he explained, "but so distinguished a guest might be permitted to step inside and select his own coat."

"Thanks for the tip about the carnation," returned Smith in a very distinct voice, and flicked that flower out of the captain's lapel.

THE tall man and the vivid girl passed the enraged captain without stopping and stepped into the entrance hall, where only a powerful doorman stood at the far end. The Chinese attendant was not in evidence and the door to the coat-room stood open. Over his shoulder Smith saw the captain detaining two guests who were about to depart.

"It's come," he said to Senga. "Stand with your back to the wall and stick till I return. Let me see what I can do."

And it came quickly. In a leisurely manner Smith entered the coat-room with his right hand under the left breast of his dinner coat. The heavy door closed with a crash and there followed a sharp detonation that the closed door could not stifle.

Senga of the Club Hibou placed a hand to her heart and leaned against the wall with closed eyes. She heard her name spoken and opened her eyes to behold Madame Lola dressed in shimmering gold, a Spanish shawl hanging from one shoulder, black eyes flashing.

"Get to your dressing-room, Senga!"

The girl cowered against the wall, a frail little figure compared with the queen of the establishment who confronted her.

"Carry her up the back stairs to her dressing-room," commanded Madame Lola, motioning to the doorman.

The attendant came forward just as the door of the coat-room opened and revealed Smith, who appeared alert but not at all excited. He was wearing his hat and his right arm hung lazily at his side. Over his left forearm, and covering the hand, was flung his light coat. From the fold of that coat projected an inch or so of blued pistol barrel.

"Just a minute," he said. "We had a little argument in your coat-room and Bummer Gortz is dead. We fired at the same instant, but I did the best job. His gun is in his hand and one cartridge has been fired. You have my name and address if you want me for a witness."

"Who are you, my dear man?" asked Madame Lola in well feigned surprise as the doorman halted under the influence of Smith's pistol barrel. "What are you talking about?"

"It seems to me," drawled Smith, "that your handsome shawl would be an appropriate parting gift to Senga. Heaven help you if you should succeed in making me angry. The shawl, madam, and be quick!"

Black eyes and gray-blue eyes clashed and held. Suddenly Madame Lola was all smiles. She tossed the heavy shawl to the girl in green.

"I hope, Mr. Smith," said the woman, now fully revealed in her tight fitting dress of gold, "that we may meet in happier circumstances."

"Unlikely," retorted Smith curtly, and walked out to the street with Senga on his arm.

Under a street light they waited for a taxi and some drops of blood fell from the right sleeve of the tall detective and splashed upon the sidewalk. The girl saw the blood and was rather limp as Smith handed her into the taxi and stood outside as he closed the door. Suddenly she leaned out of the open window.

"I am going home," she said, and kissed him before he could move.

It was the only time that anybody had thought one jump ahead of Smith during the evening.

The following day Benjamin Bradflint called again upon Aurelius Smith and found that lazy detective with his right arm in a sling, while he languidly turned the pages of a newspaper with his left hand. The detective looked up, smiled and tossed a paper to his visitor.

"I read the story," said Bradflint. "Bummer Gortz committed suicide at the Club Hibou last night after he was rejected by his sweetheart,

Senga.”

“Uh-huh,” said Smith. “Clever woman, Madame Lola.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Bradflint.

“Well,” answered Smith, “Madame Lola has

inserted an advertisement stating that Senga, sweetheart of the dead gangster, has been engaged to give an exhibition dance every night at the Club Hibou.”