

*Al owned a profitable plumbing company. Was cupidity going to make it go down the drain?*

# THE HOUSE IN BEL AIRE

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

A SOLID gold toilet seat is unsettling to the mind. Alfred Gluckshoffer, proprietor of the Round the Clock Plumbing Company, raised and lowered the lid several times experimentally and decided that it, too, was gold. It looked like gold, it felt like gold: Gluckshoffer, whose brother-in-law Milt was a salesman for a firm of manufacturing jewelers, and who had heard Milt talking about carats and alloys as long as he had known him, was sure it was gold. About fourteen carat.

From the doorway the elderly party in the dusty dress

suit cleared his throat. It was not a menacing sound, but Alfred jumped. Hastily he picked up his screwdriver and began prying at the valve in the float again.

"Oh, it's a genuine stone," Milt said later that day. "They cut the synthetics out of a boule, see, and they always show the curved lines. Yours has a good color, too. The deeper the color in sapphire, the more valuable, and this one is nearly true cornflower blue. A beauty. Worth maybe four or five hundred. Where'd you get it, Al?"

Gluckshoffer decided to be frank. "Out of that house I

was telling you about. The one where they called me to fix the can in the middle of the night. I dropped my pliers under the washbasin, and when I got down to pick them up, I found it. There was a sort of patch of inlaid work over the tub, wire and stone and tile and stuff, and I guess it must have fallen out of that."

Milt stuck his hands in his pockets and began to walk up and down the shop. Cupidity was coating his features with a dreamy, romantic glaze. "Think you could find the house again, Al?" he asked.

"I don't know. Like I told you, they called for me in a car with all the blinds down, and before I got out they tied a cloth over my eyes. I couldn't see a thing. There was a swimming pool on the left as we went in—I could tell by the way it echoed—and when I was getting out of the car I brushed up against a big tall hedge. Oh, yes, and from the way the streets felt, I think it was out in Bel Aire."

Milt sagged. "A house with a hedge and a swimming pool in Bel Aire. That's about like looking for a girl with brown eyes."

"Oh, I don't know," Gluckshoffer said perversely. "I might be able to tell it if I ran across it again. There was a kind of funny feel to the place, Milt. Sleepy. Dead. Why? Why're you so keen on locating it?"

"Don't be a dope," Milt said. "You want to be a plumber all your life?"

THEY located the house on the fifth night. It stood by itself on what must have been nearly two acres of ground, a whitely glimmering bulk, lightless and somnolent.

"Looks like there's nobody home," Milt said as he brought the car to a noiseless halt. "You oughtn't to have any trouble, Al."

Gluckshoffer snorted softly. "There's at least two people on the place," he whispered, "the chauffeur and the old geezer in the dress suit that called for me that night. Remember what you promised, Milt, about coming in for me if I'm not back in forty-five minutes. After all, this was your idea. And don't forget about honking twice if a patrol car comes by, either." His tone, though subdued, was fierce.

"Oh, sure," Milt said easily. "Don't worry about it. I won't forget."

Al Gluckshoffer got out of the car and began to worm his way through the pale green leaves of a tall pittosporum hedge. As he padded past the swimming pool (on the left, as he had remembered it) in his tennis shoes, he found himself swallowing a yawn.

This was the darnedest place. As he'd told Milt, there were two people at home—

probably more, since you wouldn't keep a chauffeur unless there was somebody for him to drive—and the old party in the dress suit must sleep in the house because he'd said something to Al about the noise of the can having awakened him. But the feel in the air was so sleepy and dead that you'd think everybody on the place had been asleep for the last hundred years.

At the back of the house a window looked promising. Al tried it and found it unlocked. Stifling a yawn, and then another one, he raised the window and slipped inside.

He went into a lavatory on the ground floor first. He had unscrewed the gold faucets on the washbasin and pried eight or ten stones out of the mosaic on the wall before it occurred to him that he was wasting his time. Would people in a house like this put their best stuff in the cans? Obviously not. The place to look for the hot stuff—the really hot hot stuff—would be in the bedrooms upstairs. Palladium-backed clothes brushes. Mirrors set with big diamonds all around the edges. He was a dope not to have thought of it before.

Al wrapped the faucets carefully in the old rags he had brought to muffle their chinking and put them in his little satchel. Noiselessly as a shadow, he stole up the stair.

In the upper hall he hesi-

tated. His idea about the bedrooms was all very well, but it wouldn't do to pick one where the old geezer in the dress suit, say, was asleep.

**T**HE moonlight slanting through the big windows in the hall and falling on the door to his right put an end to Al's difficulties. There were cobwebs thick between the door itself and the jamb, cobwebs all over the frame. A room like that must be perfectly safe. There couldn't be anybody in a room like that. Softly he turned the knob.

The bed, swathed in shimmering gauze, was at one end of the room. Al paid no attention to it. His eyes were fixed on the dressing table where, even in the subdued light, he could make out jewelry—earrings, rings, tiara, bracelets—lying in a corruscating heap. The pendants at the corners of the tiara were teardrop-shaped things, big as bantam's eggs, and the earrings and bracelets were set all over with flashing gems.

Al licked his lips. He put out a skeptical hand toward the tiara and touched the pendants very cautiously. They were cold, and from the motion his hand imparted to them, they started to swing back and forth and give out rays of colored light.

From sheer nervous excitement he was on the edge of bursting into tears or some-

thing. The stones in the bracelets seemed to be square-cut diamonds, and the pendants on the tiara surpassed anything he had ever imagined. They made him feel like getting down and kowtowing in a p̄aroxysm of unworthiness. He controlled himself and began to put the jewels away in his bag.

The earrings were following the bracelets into custody when there was a slight creak from the bed. Al turned to stone. In very much less than a second (nervous impulses, being electrical in origin, move at the speed of light, which is 186,000 m.p.s.), he had decided that the jewelry was a trap, that the trap was being sprung, and that he was hauling tail out. He began backing toward the door. There was another creak from the bed. This time it was accompanied by a wonderful, a glorious, flash of prismatic light.

Al Gluckshoffer faltered, torn cruelly between cupidity and fear. If it *wasn't* a trap, the biggest diamond in the whole world must be hanging around the throat, or otherwise depending from the person, or whoever was sleeping in the bed. Indecision almost made him groan. Then he made up his mind and, the sweat starting out on his forehead, tiptoed in the direction of the flash of light.

The beauty of the girl lying

on the bed in the moonlight was so extreme that he forgot all about the necklace which clasped her throat. He stared down at her for an instant. Then he put his bag on the floor, knelt beside the bed and drew the curtains back. He leaned forward and kissed her on the lips.

**H**IS heart was beating like a hammer. Slowly her shadowy lids opened and she looked into his eyes. A faint, joyous smile began to curve her lips.

The expression was succeeded almost instantly by a look of regal rage. "By the scepter of Mab," the girl said, sitting up in bed and glaring at him, "you are not His Highness at all! In fact, I perceive clearly from your attitude and bearing that you are not *any* Highness. You are some low creature who has no proper business of any sort in the palace. You are Another One."

With the words, she pressed a button beside her bed. While Al cowered back, there was a clamor as strident as that of a burglar alarm, and then the elderly party in the dress suit came in, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"He awakened me in the proper way," the girl said, gesturing in Al's direction, "but he is by no means the proper person."

"So I see, Your Highness," the old gent said with a bow.

"I believe—" He peered closely at Gluckshoffer, who pushed himself hard against the wall and tried to pretend that he wasn't there. "I believe he is the plumber whom I called in last week to repair the lavatory. I am sorry. What disposition does Your Highness wish me to make of him?"

"Use the transformation machine to make him into something," the princess said, turning around and punching at the pillows on her bed. They were embroidered with a little crown.

"What would Your Highness suggest?"

"Anything you like," the princess replied. The pillows arranged to her satisfaction, she lay back on them once more. "Something appropriate, of course. Frankly, Norfreet, I'm getting tired of being waked once or twice a year by some incompetent idiot who has no legitimate business in the palace in the first place. The next bungler who wakes me up, I want you to turn into a mouse and give to the cat next door to play with. Good night." Delicately she closed her eyes.

"Good night, Your Highness," the chamberlain replied with another low bow. He turned to Al, who had been

listening to this talk of transformations with a comforting sense of its impossibility, and fixed him with a hypnotic gaze. "Come with me," he said sternly. "Before I transform you, you must repair the damage you have done."

SOME twenty minutes later, the chamberlain gave the solid brass cuspidor which had been Al Gluckshoffer a contemptuous shove with his foot. He ought to take the thing up to the attic and leave it, but he was getting dreadfully sleepy. He needed his rest at his age. Some other time.

He got into bed, his joints creaking. Her Highness was right; there were altogether too many intruders in the palace these days. They needed to be shown their place, made an example of. The next person who woke him up was going to be the object of something special in the way of transformations. Norfreet began to snore.

And on the other side of the pittosporum hedge, Milt looked at his watch and decided that it was time to go in and see what had happened to Al. He started to worm his way through the hedge.

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